

1a. The Maou's Harem, part 1

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Kyou Kara Maou?! (MaruMa Gaiden #4)

Chapter 1: The Maou's Harem

Author: Takabayashi Tomo

Illustrator: Matsumoto Temari

Scans: [Portrait of a Demon King](#)

Chinese version: [魔王后宫](#) @ [Skyfire](#)

English translator: [pyrrhic_victoly](#)

⑦ 王奥



Having a close parent-child relationship only lasts for a short time, for the ten or so years before middle school.

Shibuya "Jennifer" Miko - autobiography

In My Life, I Regret Nothing (to be continued)

If what my predecessor says is true, then Greta and I only have two or three years left in our harmonious father-daughter relationship.

On top of that, as a father, I'm always away on business because of my supernatural powers. Because of this, I don't have the time to spend with her, doing "I love Daddy more than anyone in the world!" things.

That's why I've decided to try my best to do family activities with her. They're also the types of activities that a ten year old girl would be able to do in school as well as with her family.

Like hiking, rookie competitions, going to the beach, kohaku^[1] song battles, lighting fireworks, camping in the fall, Christmas... Christmas, that's not necessary, is it? Actually, the two worlds' religious beliefs are different.

And then there's an activity that sports people aren't very good at: the cultural festival^[2]. Greta's still an elementary school student. The cultural festival should just be a school festival.

I also have experience with these kinds of activities. Things like the whole class putting on a play or singing in the auditorium, or a scavenger hunt in a classroom, are like a deluxe edition way of learning through observation.

After entering high school, the school will become a replica of a shopping district, and the goal will also turn into getting dates. However, in elementary school, the goals are still very pure. Whether they like it or not, most of the guests are the kids' guardians. That is to say, the main purpose of this activity is to show off your daily school life and study achievements to Mom and Dad.

It's really too much. You lose so much face that you start to wonder why in the world there would be an activity like this.

Especially in elementary school, fourth grade. That year was the worst. My role in the play was Pine Cone #1, but my parents were running on V8 engines in the auditorium, shouting with all their might, "Yuu-chan! Yuu-chan!"

Faced with these kinds of conditions, I'd rather accept the torture of a thousand bat swings. If it wasn't for the fact that I was a strong, healthy child who got full attendance awards, then I would have faked sick to get out of the performance.

But, as the saying goes, no matter how good you think you are, there's always someone out there that's better, so always strive for the best.

As I'm remembering my humiliation at the festival, relieved that it's over, Greta runs over to find me with an innocent smile on her face, and offers an even more brutal proposition.

"Parent-child musical...?"

"Yeah."

"That's where the guardians and children listen to a musical together...right?"

Sitting on my knee with her face towards me, Greta shakes her head.

"Although I don't think it's likely...is it an activity where the guardians and children stand on stage together?"

"Yes."

"Then that means it's Greta and...me?"

"Yes!"

What are you saying--?

"Wait a minute, wait a minute! Greta, no matter if it's a school festival or a publisher's conference, isn't the point of it to let kids show their growth in front of their parents? It shouldn't be for the parents to show off their singing ability!"

"No, Yuuri. This is to show the child's growth, and also to show off the parents' growth."

So even guardians have to prove themselves?

Her slightly long reddish brown hair shakes as Greta's eyes shine and she says, "That's what Conrad said."

Damn you, Lord Weller.

Lord Conrad Weller, having lived for a while in the West on Earth, sometimes teaches Greta some random things.

Activities where parents have to participate are extremely rare in Japanese elementary schools. He was probably wandering around America or England to come across such an activity.

Of course, he could have been in Canada or Mexico or Portugal or Argentina or the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.

"But Greta, Shin Makoku doesn't have musicals!"

"No problem, Conrad already taught me what a 'musical' is."

Damn you, Lord Weller!

Because of numerous coincidences, this young girl became my daughter. She cheerfully waves her darkly tanned arms and starts to list the songs she wants to perform.

"Yuuri, listen-- Greta thinks the song Warlock's Delivery Service^[3] is pretty good, but Anissina says men wouldn't know any magic--? So I said, 'then lets do the more challenging Phantom of the Kabuki'^[4], but after Günter heard the story, he cried and said, 'That's too depressing!'"

"Uh...Greta, I find it really hard to stop talking when I have something to say, but when it comes to musicals..."

"Right, and then, I thought that even if the lead wasn't the female student in Constantine: Supernatural Prodigy^[5], it would be okay. But this time Conrad said that this work comes from the demon world, and then he said the Courtesan King^[6] would be more suited for an adult audience and asked me what I thought--? I never thought choosing a program for the performance would be so hard."

"Ah-- Greta, actually...for musicals I'm a little..."

"However!"

Slender arms wrapped around my neck, Greta's forehead is pressed to my shoulder. Her hair gives off a nice floral scent, like sunny grasslands and flowers in full bloom.

"Actually, it doesn't matter what the song is; Greta likes them all. As long as I can perform the musical together with Daddy, I'll sing anything!"

No!

Endlessly troubled, my eyebrows take on the shape of the character 'eight'^[7] as I'm screaming within my heart.

I have no musical talent I have no musical talent I have no musical talent. Ah--!

Actually, I don't hate musicals. During the compulsory education years^[8], my grades in music class were average, not good and not bad. Listening to classical music doesn't give me headaches. In middle school, I went with friends to sing karaoke. Also, I've never drawn horns on a picture of Beethoven or put nose hairs on Bach.

But no matter how hard I work, I have no musical talent. I don't understand how people who were just talking normally can have the ability to burst into song and dance.

Similarly, merging singing with background music and a plot to create an artistic performance, opera, is totally beyond me.

It's like the theory I use in my everyday life, "baseball players use baseball to decide victory or defeat".

Music with music, reciting lines with reciting lines. Let's take the different forms of performance and split them very clearly. Wouldn't that be great for both sides?

"I say... Greta, musicals aren't bad, but aren't regular dramas also very interesting? Like I'll be a king, and you can be a princess. Ah, that's not right. That would be the same as our current status. Anyway, musicals are a little..."

"Why?"

I should just tell her the truth: "Your father can't do musicals".

If I obey my daughter's wishes now, there will definitely be endless trouble later on.

However, if I take this time to firmly tell her that school festivals have to have regular plays, then Daddy can continue on to play Pine Cone #2.

In order to prevent her from becoming an arrogant and stubborn girl, childhood education is important.

For children to be spoiled too much, to grow up in an environment where they're not taught reality, is not a good thing.

My brother is the best example of this. He's always been a genius, leading him to think that, even though he's obviously a resident of Saitama Prefecture, he's going to be the governor of Tokyo.

In conclusion, always giving in to a child's requests is not good for the child's education.

As long as I insist that "we're not performing a musical", Greta will give up on it. Earthquakes, thunder, blacksmith Father...! No, Father is not a blacksmith. It should be that fires and fathers are both things to be feared.^[9]

"Listen well, Greta. I don't want to perform a mu..."

"Can't wait can't wait can't wait--! It's Greta's first time singing and dancing on stage! Oh right, Yuuri, what does it feel like? Will it be really nerve-wracking? But, even if it is, Greta won't be afraid!"

Greta puts both of her hands on my shoulders, looking at me as I tilt my head down to meet her gaze. Her reddish

brown eyes filled with enthusiasm, she looks at me shyly.

"Because I'll be together with Daddy!"

Thud!

The first Shin Makoku school festival is huge and magnificent.

For me, I had hoped to invite only a few close friends and relatives to the event.

I had no idea that, at Lord Weller's suggestion, it would become a public performance with all the families with young children in the capital coming one after another to participate.

An event like this has probably never been held before, so seats in the auditorium sold out quickly.

It's not only Mazoku who are performing.

Right now, carrying his fall purchases, Hyscliff approaches with one foot forward. Along with his beloved daughter Beatrice, they are guest performers of a song in Sir and I^[10], called "Monkey, Do You Dance?" On the stage, he carries his head, shiny with sweat, with a dancer's poise, earning him hearty applause from the audience.

Some people are watching the von Voltaire family's private secretary, Miss Anpurin^[11], as she sobs while listening to West Inch Story^[12]. What on earth has moved her so much?

Günter is obviously not a family member, but he's partnered up with Rinji von Wincott, performing a scene in "Snow Günter, Chrysanthemum Günter".

The whole audience is weeping, moved to tears by the tale of Snow Günter, who has been mistreated by a cruel master, and Chrysanthemum Günter, the silent protector hiding in the shadows of the trees (one person playing two parts).

If such a scene were to occur on Earth, there would definitely be a lot of "The entire nation is moved! Extremely thrilling!" reviews.

"Apologies for the wait, ladies and gentlemen. This happy occasion, Shin Makoku's first 'Singing Dancing Family Party', has finally arrived at the last performance. The last act will be our Maou, His Majesty Yuuri, His Excellency Wolfram von Bielefeld, and Princess Greta in a musical filled with love and courage and excitement-- 'Through Wisconsin^[13] from 'Alien vs. Predator'! Please, Your Majesty, Your Highness the Princess, show us your talent!"

At Günter's Shinjuku^[14] theatre style announcement, the three of us leap up onto the stage.

"Attack intelligently, Predator!"

"Use strength in numbers to decide victory, Alien!"

"Humans are so troublesome!"

"Your skin seems very hard, Predator!"

"More goo, Alien!"

"To outer space for a big fight!"

Although the selection is one that, if asked, "Is this really a musical?" I wouldn't know how to respond, this is our lead actress Greta's wish, so there's nothing to be done about it.

I have no idea where she knows Alien from. Unexpectedly, she asked me with a worshipful expression, "Who's stronger, Sigourney Weaver^[15] or Anissina?"

I really hope my answer doesn't affect her "list of people I want to be".

The only person who knows about "Predator" is me.

Therefore, writing the lines and music, the instructions, stage effects, model designs, research, etc., everything was done by me.

Even though I was Robert Rodriguez^[16] for this challenge, in the end I came to fully understand that I have no talent for these things.

Sure enough, the whole audience is getting up and booing.

I tried my best to hold back on the cruel feeling in the lyrics, but it looks like the guardians of the children aren't very pleased.

I can only see the audience all get up out of their seats at once, roaring up at the ceiling like animals, even cupping both hands around their mouths to yell.

This scene does not look like applause. For us, the father-daughter pairs who are obviously just amateurs, but who gave it our all in this performance, this is really brutal treatment.

"I had no idea the entire audience would get up and boo at us..."

"It's really unexpected..." Wolfram says.

He's standing by Greta and I, who are feeling dejected.

Because he's wearing a helmet, his voice is muffled.

"It seems as if everyone is quite moved. That's the 'I want to pass on this feeling to His Majesty Shinou' gesture."

"What did you say? That's called being moved? I thought they wanted a refund! It looks like you can relax, Greta! Our performance seems to have been a success!"

"Really? Scary... Ha-- I thought we were doomed!"

I pick Greta up, rushing back on to the stage, where the audience is shouting for an encore. The audience smiles and points at us, saying, "Your Majesty, behind you! Look behind you!"

It turns out that we're being chased by Predator.

Backstage, there are fresh flowers everywhere.

The small green room is filled with bouquets of various kinds of brightly colored flowers, and also with the flowers' sweet fragrance.

"So pretty--"

"These are all for Greta, huh."

"Really? Then can I bring them all back home? Can I put these flowers in my room?"

"We'll get someone to help move them later."

I was preparing to stroke her soft curls, but the little girl's attention has already flown to the pile of gifts.

I'm sweating all over because I'm dressed in a costume that almost covers my entire body. It's very difficult just taking off the alien's rubber headpiece.

As my face hits the open air, the warm sweat quickly dripping down from my hair, I finally realize how difficult it is to play the part of the monster.

The next time I go to the Tokyo Dome, I won't look to shake hands with actor playing the hero. Instead, I'll shake hands with the villain.

"Haa--"

"What is it, Yuuri? You look really tired."

Wolfram has only removed the upper half of his costume. Even though he's been singing and dancing, he still looks relaxed.

Of course, that's also to be expected. After all, being the greatest hunter in the universe, Predator's outfit must be much lighter than Alien's.

"We've only moved a little and you're already covered in sweat. It's obvious that your regular exercise regimen is inadequate."

"My training, should be, more than, what, you do. Wasn't it just that your part was easier?"

"What? You're blaming our roles? Whose swordsmanship is better?"

"Predator should be better."

"Since it's like that, then it's only right that I play this part."

"What you've said isn't wrong, but you..."

"The candidate for The Crimson Goddess."^[17]

Lord Wolfram von Bielefeldt, in the short time that he was on stage, was skilled in three areas of performance. Not only were his movements smooth, but his temperament was perfect and he even had the talent to draw in the audience's attention.

There's only one thing I didn't like about his performance as Predator. As I'm about to point this out--

"May I come in?"

Knocking on the door a few times, Lord Weller peeks in.

"Conrad!"

Greta rushes over and pulls him into the room.

Conrad first praises today's leading actress, then looks over at the half-dressed actors and says, "Your Majesty's performance was also wonderful. The auditorium was filled with an intensity of feeling."

"Thank you for your words of praise... but Conrad, hear me out! I've been completely deceived! This guy is obviously a blond bombshell bishounen! Why doesn't he have a clear and high boy's voice, but is instead really mature and manly sounding?!"

"Well, was Your Majesty anticipating a high voiced alien? I'm sorry, I don't have Predator's data, and didn't know what his voice was like."

Predator's data?^[18] The way he said it was ingenious. I'm unable to tell if it's a cold joke or not. However, Lord Weller continues to show his cheerful smile and says, "Don't you think that having a manlier voice gives more of a 'Predator is here!'^[19] feeling?"

"Waaah--! I'm pretending not to hear it!"

There's no need to keep saying it!

"However, I regret that I'm not just here to joke around. Please come in; no one's going to be angry."

Unreadable Conrad looks at me, whose pain never ends, with his head lowered. He pushes the door open and calls in a small shadow.

The boy lifts up his head, his strawberry blond hair bobbing with this movement.

He looks to be about Greta's age, but if he's Mazoku, his real age will be more than that.

His appearance is neat; he's not wearing any accessories. At a glance, I can tell that he's not one of the aristocratic or wealthy children who were performing in the auditorium.

"Who is he?" Greta stands on her tiptoes to ask.

Hearing others ask about him, the boy blushes in embarrassment and clears his throat.

"That..."

"He's a very enthusiastic fan. His name is Pachiri. He was listening to the performance through the back wall."

"That...p-performance was wonderful!"

The boy forcefully interrupts Conrad and presents the thing he was hiding behind his back.

"For Her Highness the princess!"

It's a white flower that can be found anywhere in the courtyard. Although it's smaller than the flowers that fill up the room backstage, it's actually quite delicate and beautiful.

Seeing how the gift was given with sincerity, the leading actress is overjoyed.

"Why don't you put it in her hair?"

Knowing very well how little girls think, Lord Weller says these words with a professional smile.

"Un."

Pachiri, fingers shaking uncontrollably, puts the flower into the reddish brown hair.

"Look, look! Isn't it pretty--?"

Greta walks back over to us with the white flower in her hair, slightly embarrassed.

She's very pretty, really very pretty.

Daughter, your two daddies' feelings are very complex.

Wolf is gripping the shotgun prop very tightly. A vein is throbbing in his temples, almost completely ruining his pretty boy appearance.





Perhaps Pachiri gained some courage after giving her the flower. He probably wants to win over the fathers, so this time he directs his speech toward us. He might be using a little too much effort, because he's stuttering a bit.

"The song, was great! I heard that Your Majesty personally wrote it. I've never heard it before. It's really, really, really, really good."

"Thanks."

Wolf and I raised our right hands at the same time.

Because we went into Daddy Mode at the exact same time, our response was quite cold.

"Since the song was so great, I memorized all of it. I really memorized all of it! When I'm out in the schoolyard, I'll definitely sing it to the younger kids!"

Then he closes his eyes, lifts his chin up a little, and starts singing a part from the song's climax.

It's the "more goo, Alien" part.

"Humans are so troublesome! To outer space for a big fight!"

I was preparing to apologize for writing such idiotic lyrics, but his beautiful singing has rendered me speechless.

This is the beautiful tenor that I've been waiting for, the angelic sound that won't lose to the Vienna Boys' Choir.

I think I can see wings behind Pachiri's back.

Just listening to him makes my emotions flow with the song.

If he were to sing of his heart's sorrow, the audience would fall under that influence; if he were to sing a happy song, my heart would also be filled with happiness. That's the type of feeling his singing gives.

"That was surprisingly great! It's amazing how you have such a beautiful voice! You sang really well!"

"Eh... Your praise is too much. I'm not... I'm not that good."

"Don't be so modest. What do you mean, 'not that good'? Have you gotten professional training? After having an instructor, your singing is outstanding."

"That is, may I ask... What does an 'instructor' instruct? My teacher is just the headmistress."

"Headmistress... I get it; you're a student at a famous music conservatory, right? So that means you're either going to sing operas or musicals? Damn, it's too bad this country doesn't have a place like Broadway. I'd go with you and sign you up for it right away."

"Your Majesty."

I'm really excited, and Conrad has to calm me down before he can correct me.

"Pachiri hasn't had any special music lessons. He lives in the orphanage just outside the castle walls. I remember that all the children there are looked after by the headmistress alone."

"Orphanage?"

"Yes."

"If it's an orphanage, then your teacher is like a family member... So that's how it is. No wonder you aren't studying at a conservatory. I'm sorry, I shouldn't have blurted out those wild guesses."

I'm so thoughtless. My mood just went from high and excited all the way down to the bottom of a valley. To the two children, I'm just an embarrassing guardian.

Greta keeps looking over at the boy and me, then asks Pachiri with a slightly stiff tone, "Your dad and mom aren't here anymore?"

"That's right."

He awkwardly grips his hands behind his back.

"Since you don't have any family, are you lonely?"

"No."

He tilts his head, then repeats his response. "No. I have lots of friends at the orphanage, and there are also lots of kids who are younger than me. We get along really well, just like real siblings. The headmistress says we're actually very lucky, and I think so, too. She said that during the war, no one was willing to help orphans. But kids born after the war have things to eat and a place to live. Also, starting this year, we're getting a lot more money from the government, so there's even time to teach the younger kids how to read. The headmistress is happy, and I'm happy."

Pachiri delivers these words all with one breath until his face turns red, then he looks at me with shining eyes.

"Thank you, Your Majesty!"

"Ah, I haven't done anything..."

I'm the one who should feel embarrassed. I stare down at the floor, but there's only my brown, goo-covered feet in that direction.

I did look over the budget request once, and made a big fuss over looking after the people's standards of living and education. I also made an unreasonable decree: "It's fine if we don't paint the walls with gold leaf. Use that money to establish a compulsory education system."

But the person who calculated the expenses, raised funds, and carried out the writing and implementation of the detailed policy wasn't me.

It was Lord von Voltaire and Lord von Kleist.

The person accepting your heartfelt thanks right now is a man who only knows how to make a big fuss. Knowing this makes it impossible for me not to lower my head in shame.

If I'd known earlier that I'd be too ashamed to show my face, then I wouldn't have used the excuse of being "unfamiliar with government administration" to push all the work onto my aides back then. At the very least, it's only right that I should be the one to complete my own proposals.

The boy hasn't noticed my regret. He's talking with Greta and Wolfram about "family" things, even proudly talking about his "siblings".

"A few years ago, our work kept us busier than our studies. I never thought we'd have time every day to learn writing and math. The older kids, like me, are also sometimes responsible for teaching the younger kids. They learn really fast; they're really smart."

"You said 'work'. What did you do?" Greta, who has never left the castle, asks. Lord Weller responds to Greta's question in his place.

"In order to receive government funds for operation, the orphanage makes bread and cheese and other long-lasting rations for the soldiers, and they regularly deliver these to the castle. Pachiri was pushing his cart on the way back to the orphanage. Fortunately, he passed by the theatre."

"We just make dried meat and fish, and there are also foods like dried vegetables that return to their normal size after soaking in water. The headmistress is the one who makes the preserved food... I think Your Majesty...hasn't seen this type of food before?"

"I know about it. It's similar to dried mackerel and frozen dehydrated cabbage, right? I've not only seen them, but I've also eaten them before."

"Really?"

Then I suddenly saw the light. The things that I've eaten might not have been made here, but every time I open a cup of instant ramen it's just like the foods he describes.

"They're really convenient."

As soon as I think of pouring hot water on the vegetables, as well as on the miso soup and the noodles, my suppressed hunger involuntarily makes itself known. I didn't even eat lunch before the performance.

Because Greta was leaning her whole body against me, I didn't notice that she had turned her head around to look at me unhappily.

"...Hate them." She stomps her foot as she scornfully says, "Greta hates dried vegetables and meat the most!"

"Hey, you can't say that." I quickly grab her shoulder, but it's too late and she can't take back her words.

"Is that so?" Pachiri is suddenly depressed. He lowers his head like a withered flower.

She would normally never say such cruel words. What kind of bad experience did Greta have?

Well, I can't verify it now. I have to hurry to pull the topic back.

"But you're really great! You're so young, and you're already working and studying at the same time. Since you're so talented, would you like to try for a scholarship to enter a specialty school? I bet your grades in music are really good."

"Grades?"

The boy asks me as if it's his first time hearing the noun. Now I realize that our conversation is never going to match up.

"I was referring to the grades you get in school. If they're not bad, then it's possible for the school authorities to write you letters of recommendation. Uh...your teacher, and in the music class..."

Wolfram shifts a bit.

Though I don't know why, his face is getting more and more disgusted.

Conrad saw his restless little brother, and started speaking to resolve my problem.

"He hasn't had any music lessons."

"Whoa, he hasn't?"

"Only children of wealthy merchants and the nobility receive higher education. They are the only ones who will have lessons in artistic subjects. Schools for ordinary children would not have the fine arts in their curriculum."

"Right-- I didn't know that."

So they don't have things like Japanese elementary and middle schools, where students have choir practice. They don't learn "Little Brown Jug" or "Neko Funjatta"^[20].

"Language and math are more important."

"That's true, but... This way, won't it influence the what's it called... the knowledge, strength, quantity, and quality of art education?"

It's true that language and math have practical applications and are very important, but I looked at a newspaper recently, and it had an article that said, "childhood music education has a large influence in promoting brain development". And also, also...

"Get over here."

"It hurts! Ow, ow! Stop it, Wolfram!"

Perhaps the more I say, the angrier he gets. Driven beyond the limits of his patience, Wolfram angrily grabs my ear and drags me to the corner of the room.

"Don't do that; it really hurts!"

"Listen clearly, Yuuri. Even if you're cracking jokes in front of the commoners, there's a limit!"

"When was I joking?"

"Didn't you just say it? That you want to let him study music? What a joke. Are you going to be just like before, doing whatever you feel like, and establishing another troublesome system?"

"I haven't just done whatever I felt like. The way you speak of it is out of line," I mutter in disappointment.

I thought I did well; I didn't think the proposal would be so easily dismissed by other people.

"Listen up. If it wasn't for the fact that the new king wanted to establish an elementary school, the commoners wouldn't even need to accept any education. It's enough that children loitering around the street corners learn the vocational skills necessary for work. Those who don't want to inherit the family property, or those who truly want to receive education, can join the military academy. The people have always been living like this, and there haven't been any problems. It's only you who's been saying, 'compulsory education, compulsory education'. That's the only reason we're giving away free education to the children too young for employment!"

"What you say may be true."

The atmosphere is getting weirder and weirder.

It's not only his expression. Even his eyes, which are usually emerald green, have become a dark green, indicating that he's about to explode with rage.

"Just building the school and hiring teachers cost a lot of money! You said even the villages should be places where one can receive primary education, isn't that right? Moreover, the entire nation has to carry this out together. Do you have any idea how much stress you put on my older brother? All of this is because you're such a strong advocate of letting the commoners learn how to read, learn how to write, and raise their computational capabilities!"

"Wolf..."

"And now it's like this. It's not enough to let the commoners learn language and math, but now you want to let them learn art which they can't apply to their daily lives? Learning to sing can come from listening to the parents sing. Dancing can be acquired naturally by participating in rites and ceremonies. Do you really think it's necessary to use national funds to let those below us learn these things?"

"Wolf!"

"What? Are you thinking of refuting this?"

Of course I am.

I was just introspecting on how I shouldn't make other people work on my policies. In order not to make the same mistake again, I thought I needed to look into this more, and present the proposal only after I had prepared a plan that I could personally see carried out.

So I now have a rebuttal, even if it's only aimed at admonishing him for his way of thinking.

I hold up both hands in front of my chest, trying my best to keep my emotions in check.

"Your view seems full of discrimination."

"What did you say? When was I being discriminatory?"

"All right, all right, you can stop the lover's spat now!"

My most beloved daughter changes the topic away from the explosive situation just in time. But what "lover's spat"?

"You're wrong, Greta. We weren't fighting."

Who was it? Who taught my daughter such a strange noun?

"That... I'm sorry."

When I turned back, I discovered Pachiri standing by the doorway with his face drained of color.

"I'm really sorry. If it was something I said that was disrespectful...then..."

Lord Weller kneels down, putting them at just the right height to meet eye to eye, and comforts him in a gentle voice.

I only see the kid lightly nod in response, but tears keep streaming down his cheeks.

As soon as Wolfram and I see this scene, we hurry to comfort him as well.

"Ah! You've misunderstood, Pachiri! You haven't said anything disrespectful!"

"That's right, I must thank you for giving the flower to Greta!"

We're not even mad about the intimate behavior you showed toward our precious daughter. That's right, there's nothing for us to be angry about.

"Thank you for coming to see our performance. Next time, if we have another school festival, we'll prepare a seat for you in the audience."

When the red-eyed boy nodded happily--

"Your Majesty--!"

"Oh, no. It's Günter."

From the far end of the hall, Lord von Kleist and the spectators scream together.

Presumably, his beautiful gray hair is now moving parallel with the ground as he charges over at a fierce speed.

"He must be done with his managerial duties by now. This sucks. If he finds me, he'll definitely harass me with a hug, caress my face, cover my whole body with Günter juice."

And that's not all it takes to settle things.

I'll also be forced to listen to him praise His Majesty the Maou's beauty and intelligence, and this will take at least two hours!

His praise makes me so embarrassed that I could die. For me, speaking of those things is like torture.

"Your Majesty, if you want to leave before Günter catches you..." Conrad, who understands the way I think, winks at me and points to the door, saying, "Then you'll have to quickly take off the costume."

"Okay, I'll get it off in ten seconds! Greta, help me pull."

"Un!"

Pachiri lifts his head. Even his speaking voice is a high boy's voice. "I know a shortcut that leads to the castle!"

"That's great. Then we'll have to trouble you to show us the way. Thank you, Pachiri."

"No, it's nothing."

Less than a minute later, Lord von Kleist arrives in the backstage room where we fled in a hurry.

"Ah! This is bad! He's shed his shell, the outer covering! How, Your Majesty? How have you become a molted shell?"

According to the news I received afterward, Günter was not the only person in the green room at the time.

A creature with eight eyes was in the flowers, gleaming eyes filled with envy, watching our motions from beginning to end.

The horrible sounds echo through the castle halls. It happened after I, who steadfastly keeps to an early to bed, early to rise schedule, had fallen into a deep sleep.

"Hoot! Ding! Dong! HUUUUOOORRRREEENGOOOOHH!"

I wake up scared and jump up, wanting to cry. It's like the frightening yells of a wild beast. "Ah, what's the matter? What strange sound was that? Was it a baboon, or has Tarzan come?"

"The noise is coming from Greta's room!" Wolfram's voice almost makes me roll off the bed in shock.

"Greta's room?"

There are only two reactions for this. Rolling off the bed represents the angry and frightened response, "What did you say? My precious daughter is in serious trouble right now!" Adding a little bit of suspicion, it was like the sound of a dying Hibagon^[21]. Was that really Greta's voice?

But as I run up to Greta's room out of breath, I'm faced with an unexpected development.

"Are you okay, Gr..."

I can't even get out the first syllable of her name.

The entire room is in a miserable condition, like the set of a horror movie.

I haven't even had time to finish the sentence, "Are you okay, Greta?" before I see her body, dressed in light blue pajamas. Her arms are crossed in front of her as she stands on the bed with an extremely self-satisfied expression. She's panting, but no matter how I look at it, she doesn't seem to have been attacked.

"What are you doing... No, what happened here?"

My hand is resting on the open door. I've already been scared stiff.

Wolfram's nightgown almost slipped off.

"It was a spider! A giant spider was attacking!"

"No, wait a minute, it could also have been a moth larva. They'll also spit a huge, scary ball of silk at people."

In front of me is an area that looks like an alien's nesting ground. All around, the walls are covered in web-like silk.

Coming down from all four corners of the ceiling are also prey covered in tenacious hanging strands of silk. That should be the food for the baby aliens.

"F-food?"

"Ah! Yuuri, Wolf!"

Oh no, we've been found!

No, that's not right. It's just that Greta spotted us and jumped down from the bed. And she even thumped her perfect little head on my belly.

"Aww...s-super cute. No, no, now's not the time to talk about that. Greta, where did this stuff come from? It was thieves who actually dared to sneak into a little girl's room in the middle of the night! As a father, I could wring their necks three times and it wouldn't be enough! Are you okay, Greta? Are you hurt? How much stuff did we lose? Oh! What happened to this room's guard?"

"There hasn't been a report of an invasion... Ah!"

Conrad hurries over with several soldiers in tow. Upon seeing the terrible condition of the room, he couldn't help but marvel at it.

"It has an artistic feel to it. Did Greta make this trap?"

"Trap?"

Hearing Conrad's praise, Greta lightly jumps back on the bed.

"Aren't I really fierce? Awesome! As long as they meet the Trap Girl Greta, all evil people will end up with the same fate!"

"Trap...Girl...Gre... Wait a minute. Greta. Explain from the beginning. What's this about a Trap Girl Greta? Daddy doesn't remember raising such a child!"

"It's because..."

The ten year old girl puffs out her cheeks resentfully. She grabs my hand and starts explaining nonstop.

"Because Greta doesn't have magic. I can't become the Poison Lady like Anissina! But traps don't need magic, so I thought I'd better become Trap Girl Greta!"

"In the future, please don't decide to do something so scary all by yourself, okay?"

Anissina... Why does it have something to do with Lady Anissina again?

"I heard that."

As if hearing my innermost thoughts, Lady Anissina von Karbelnikoff nimbly steps forward. "What happened? The agonizing cries^[22] made the psychology lab's 'Sympathy-kun' react with excessive sympathy, and it even filled up with tears. Ah!"

The Red Devil who strikes fear into the hearts of Shin Makoku's men, the Poison Lady Anissina, lifts up the corners of her beautiful lips into a confident smile.

"It was a great trap. You must have looked through my collection of books, A Woman's Trap, Awful Demonic Silk Threads for Trapping Men, At the End of Love and Desire There Awaits a Billionaire? Or Steamy Hell? Isn't that right?"

"No way, the title and the contents are too different..."

No matter what time it is, Anissina always appears full of energy.

Her sky blue eyes are always shining with knowledge and curiosity. With her hands are clasped in front, she stands leaning back with her head tilted up, which makes her petite figure look very dignified. Her red hair rests at her back, and she's also wearing what looks to be a very warm long dress.

To her, this isn't sleepwear, but rather an outfit for late night experimentation.

"Anyway, who are these people? Since no one has stormed the castle, they must be people from within the castle!"

Wolfram unsheathes his sword, grips it tightly, and slices down one of the bundles hanging in the middle of the room. He's wearing a cream colored nightgown and holding a longsword; that type of appearance totally doesn't match up. This time, the body, which I doubt is human, has started to struggle.

"Ack--"

"Why don't you let them down, Greta. They can't fight back in this condition."

After hearing me speak, Greta immediately begins to look embarrassed. She hunches in a bit and says, "But Greta is a novice Trap Girl. I don't know how to release the prey yet."

She isn't even done speaking when Anissina takes up a large pair of shears and cuts down the webs. Each captured prey lets out a muffled thump as it falls to the ground. I guess there's no need for a special technique.

The guards finally get the hint and start following her lead. I only see four of the things fall to the ground one after another.

Only as they removed the trap covering the entire bodies are we able to get a look at the faces.

"I've never seen these guys before. Wolfram, you recognize them?"

"I don't recall..."

"Outsiders don't never have no kindness. Bah! Bah! Bah!"

One of the four people spits out his mouthful of silk, and it's only with great difficulty that he can get out these words for everyone to hear. In the blink of an eye, he had evolved from prey to a human being.

"It's no surprise that you don't recognize us. It's because we've always been hiding in Blood Pledge Castle, so we haven't had any contact with the outside world."

The intruder who was speaking seems to have finally noticed me standing with Greta. At once, he peels off the rest of the trap stuck to his body.

"Your Majesty! Ah, Your Majesty the new king! How can this be? I never meant for you to meet me while I was wrapped up like an eggroll! Ah, please don't look. I beg of you not to look upon this ugly caterpillar!"

He's crying as his body sways with pain, and then he molts out of his covering.

As for the other three still lying on the ground, they also start to wriggle similarly while shedding their skin.

The four muscular, half-naked men struggle to get out of the trap. Their hair colors are gold, platinum, brown, and purple, respectively, but their uniforms are all the same.

No, their clothes are too stupid to be called uniforms.

Because their uniforms...are just huge muscles, white poofy pants, and little bow ties.

Also, their skin is unnaturally glossy.

"If I had known our prey were muscular... and half-naked men wearing bow ties, I would have left them all rolled up."

"No, Greta! Don't look or you'll hurt your eyes!"

The four men don't pay any attention to Wolfram and me. They start getting into position to introduce themselves.

Once the four of them are lined up properly, it looks like the letter N, and it seems as if each person's spot has already been predetermined.

The leader, the one wearing a light yellow bow tie, snaps his fingers and they all start marching in place. Presumably, that was their secret signal.

In my mind, I give them the caption, "And now for today's musical number."

"Our wonderful bodies, reborn under the desert sky, are made to please His Majesty the Maou. We devote our lives to His Majesty. If not us, then who?!"

"Chungachungachungachung--"

"Shout to the heavens, to Earth, to man, and summon me. With hard work and skill, I will protect His Majesty the Maou's good fortune."

"The five of us together are the 'Crazy Hunky Manservant Corps?!'"





Ending it in the form of a question seems inadequate.

For all of them, after they finished speaking their lines, there would also be a huge explosion.

The air in the room is really bad now.

"By the way, the fifth member is out because he pulled a muscle."

"We asked him to rest up and take care... Wait, why am I talking about him? That has nothing to do with introducing myself!"

"Ah-- Really, it's pointless to keep speaking. Quickly, round them all up and throw them in jail!" Wolfram, who was already angry at having to get out of bed, got even angrier than me.

"P-please wait, wait! We beg of you to listen to our story!"

"In that case, don't talk about whatever corps, just state your name and rank. Also, no more choreographed movements. Unless you love your own muscles that much? Or you're deliberately trying to provoke me into feeling inferior, therefore forcing me to punish you, huh?"

"Nonononono, no it's not like that! It's really not like that!"

The man with the yellow bow tie waves his hands in denial; his dark gold hair gently shakes along with it.

All of them have mushroom hair. Strangely, I care very much about this.

"We came from deep within Blood Pledge Castle, from behind a rarely used corridor, to greet the new His Majesty the Maou. We also came because we are proud of the faces and bodies of the 'Crazy Hunky Manservant Corps?'. We embrace the idea of 'Perhaps We're Very Handsome?' so we took on this name."

The brunet with the blue bow tie adds, "I'm Blue Crazy Hunk Glenn!"

Ta da!

The man with the light blond hair and red bow tie says, "I myself am Red Crazy Hunk Monore!"

Ta da da da--! We just told you not to do those explosive poses. Anyway, there's this small matter of no importance, but I found out that this man's nipples are crooked.

Next is the man with the orange bow tie. "Oh, it's Ou's turn! Ou is a Crazy Hunk!"

I really want to say, "There's no way that there could be a guy speaking Kansai-ben ^[23] in a fantasy world!" Leaving that aside, the thing that's making me feel uneasy about them is that their names aren't unified at all.

Last is their polite leader. He pulls at his yellow bow tie and says, "And I am the exploding mayonnaise blossom, Mayo. Yes, Your Majesty, the weather's getting warmer and warmer. Soon, it will be Your Majesty's season."

Mayo, who's in the lead, seems to want to direct the rest of them.

"Today, in order to show off our performance skills, we have come from far away to Her Highness the Princess's room. Peroperopero!"

As soon as he finishes speaking, he places his hand next to his mouth and an endless stream of playing cards comes flying out.

Greta quickly dodges to the side, giving a response appropriate for a young girl. "Eew-- Gross!"

"I wanted to use that new magic to please everyone..."

Honestly, I feel really awkward.

Because I've already seen that kind of stuff on television, and anyway, Lady Anissina could probably come up with magic that's a lot more frightening.

Wolfram has managed to suppress his anger at having been woken up, and is preparing to return to sleep in his standing position.

The guys keep trying to flex their muscles into making everybody applaud. Although they're not scaring anyone, they're not getting the applause they want.

I tilt my head in confusion, and discover that the always calm and collected Lord Weller unexpectedly has his mouth half open in surprise.

"C-Conrad?"

It looks like I'll have to change my previous evaluation of him.

"Awooawooawoo, didn't everyone think that was interesting? What was that? It was magic, magnificent magic!"

Apparently, within the 'Crazy Hunky Manservant Corps?', the performance duties are relegated only to the one with the cream-colored bow tie, Mayo. The other three are just there to stand behind him while flexing their muscles and singing "la la la~", probably in an attempt to provide background music.

At this time, Mayo gave a great big cheer and brought his hands together in a clap. "Come on, Mayo. Come on, Mayo... Come on, Mayo!"

I'm only able to see a small flame burst out before the whole room is filled with beige-colored smoke.

As the smog gradually dissipates, I see that there's still a gray body left stuck on the ceiling from the Trap Girl's masterpiece, and it's wriggling.

"Aaaah!"

"Hey, what....ah!"

Greta shouts loudly; I'm so scared that I shout, too.

Wrapped up in many layers of silk are three gigantic spiders.

Its abdomen is about as big as a man's head, and with its eight bristly legs, it nimbly scuttles into the corner.

I desperately hold onto Greta, who's standing on the bed, reaching out to touch them. After all, they're basketball-sized spiders. No matter what, she can't just casually touch them.

"Stop, Greta! It's dangerous to reach out like that. What if you get bitten?"

"How could they bite me? They're not poisonous, they're bat bristle crabs."

"Bat bristle...uh, crabs? That's not right. No matter how you look at them, aren't they super huge wolf spiders?"

"No way. It's a bat bristle crab. It's really rare to see them outside of the forest. So amazing--! Where did these come from?"

Finally succeeding with his difficult performance, the man with the bow tie smiles brightly at the princess. "I haven't used any secret techniques or tricks. Because it's wonderful magic."

"But the other three people have disappeared. It really makes you wonder." Lady Anissina's callous voice frightens Mayo until he's trembling uncontrollably.

Conrad and I also have a bad feeling about this, so we look all around the room.

I can't find them. They were just here, Red, Blue, and Orange, and now there's no sign of them.

"Mayo, you wouldn't have used alchem...wah!"

"Yuuri, that phrase is never to be spoken!"

Wolfram, who had dozed off, suddenly wakes up to slam his hand over my mouth. He probably was choked awake by the smoke.

"Nonononono, Your Majesty, Your Excellency, this isn't anything dangerous. Actually, our performance is thought up specifically to please Your Majesty the Maou. We've practiced many times to be able to use this skill. It isn't anything that should worry you."

However, the sound of the brass bed frame breaking interrupts Mayo's speech.

With her long, fiery red hair thrown over her shoulder, Anissina crosses her hands over her chest. She straightens her back minutely and levels a fearless smile at the man with the bow tie. "Stop it with the idle chatter."

Lady Anissina kicks the wall behind her with the heel of her sharp-toed boots, and it immediately smashed through and made a hole in the wall. I had originally planned to pretend not to see that, but the impact shakes up to the ceiling and the bat bristle crabs fall down one by one.

"Well."

Astonishingly, as soon as those gray things touched the floor, they vanished, leaving only a bunch of men in poofy pants writhing on the ground.

Could it be that we all just saw an illusion?

"I hadn't thought that you would use smoke to induce collective hypnosis. That's rather arrogant. Looks like you have some experience with poisonous substances, huh."

Only when I heard "poisonous substances" did I notice that my throat suddenly hurt a lot, and I feel like I want to cough, but I can't.

"Don't worry, everyone! It's just part of the equipment to develop the magic!"

The mad scientist, Lady Anissina von Karbelnikoff, pulls out a piece of flag-like cloth that was tucked into her chest. She swings it around, making a 'patapata' sound.

"I just have to use this magic air purifier, 'Forever Clean Machine' ^[24], and it will put the smoke to good use as well as dispel the collective hypnosis. What's wrong, Mayo? You can only fool an average toxicologist. In the end, you won't be able to compare to me, the Poison Lady, who has studied this to the point of perfection."

"Ha, haha-- Of course."

Seeing their leader horribly defeated(?) in front of their eyes, the three other guys sit down and begin to sob.

With victory all hers, the insufferably arrogant Lady Anissina waves her flag while interrogating the men. "You said that you were from deep within Blood Pledge Castle, from behind a corridor that few people ever visit?"

They nod.

"So this group of crazy men..."

They nod.

"Is from the Maou Oku?"

Ta da da da--! This is really an appropriate opportunity for a choreographed explosion.

Maou Oku... What a strange name. Although I'm supposed to be the master of Blood Pledge Castle, I only know about as much as Greta. There are many things I don't know here, and also many names of places I'm only hearing for the first time.

"Conrad, what's the Maou Oku?" I don't want anyone else to find out about my ignorance, so I whisper, but unfortunately I don't get the desired result.

"Actually, I'm not very clear on that, either. I think...Günter would know about it."

"Ah, Günter would know. Anyway, what happened to Günter? It's really weird. Something this big is happening, and Günter's always foaming at the mouth to catch up to us, but he isn't here."

Lady Anissina, who was waving her flag with pride, suddenly looks like she's just remembered something and puts her finger to her lip. "Oh, oops! How could I be so forgetful? I left Lord von Voltaire tied up on the merman exercise machine, 'Little Carp-kun' and ran over here. It's about time I went back to let him out, otherwise if he uses it for too long, he might sprain his hips from all the twisting and shaking."

What's this "Maou Oku"?

It's for the Maou to seek entertainment and cure his weariness, because although he holds an incomparably high position, he cannot leave the castle. At times, it's also to satisfy his nightly passions, and because it's located deep within Blood Pledge Castle, outsiders cannot enter. It's a secret place; a midnight garden exclusively for the Maou.

Besides the Maou, no one else can enter. In addition, it's said that the people who take care of the place all wholeheartedly adore His Majesty the Maou and have pledged their body and mind to him.

Mayo clasps his hands over his stomach and says as if he's in a dream, "It's heaven on earth, the Maou Oku."

"But the thing is, no matter how much I hear it, it still sounds like some sort of job." ^[25]

Greta lies down with her head on my knee. She's fallen asleep.

Lady Anissina rushes back from attending to her magical exercise machine. "That takes care of it. If the Maou is out prowling the streets every night, playing until dawn, that would cause many problems. That's why this exclusive playground for the Maou was established. In other words, this ōoku where the Maou doesn't have to worry about selecting a companion."

(Meanwhile, it looked like Gwendal really had sprained his hip. Lady Anissina smiled and said, "But don't worry, I have this special machine that will cure you, 'Sparkling Fish'^[26].)

"Ōoku... In Japanese, that would be '大奥'... That is to say, it's a HAREM? ^[27] Wait a minute? The Maou definitely has a harem? In other words, this 'Maou Oku' place is filled with the beautiful women that past Maous have gathered? Or were they really picky?"

Thinking about that, my entire mind is overwhelmed by sexy daydreams.

I never thought that the scenarios in my older brother's favorite bishoujo games would be reenacted in Blood Pledge Castle.

Girls in various outfits from different time periods, all looking after the Maou. There's a girl in a swimsuit, and one in a sailor fuku.

Ah! I'm the Maou! Rejoice! Yeah, it's good to be the Maou. I really want to shout out, "Long live the Maou's harem!" and then run around in celebration on the roof of the castle.

On the other hand, the two people who know the secret about their mother are crouched in a corner, looking very sorrowful.

They're having a long talk right now; holding a meeting between brothers.

Even if they feel bad being surrounded by these muscular guys, there's no need to get so depressed, is there?

"Mayo, what do you guys do in this 'Maou Oku'?"

"Since we're entertainers, we sing and dance, put on plays and perform magic, etc. Our job is to continuously improve each aspect of performance in order to please Your Majesty the Maou. Yes, yes. Also, musicals such as the one you performed today with Her Highness the Princess are also our specialty."

"To... To outer space for a big fight..." Greta talks in her sleep as she sprawls over my knee.

"If it's to the Maou's liking, we will learn to perform it no matter what. That is our duty. Actually, the Maou's Ōoku is a place for Your Majesty when you are weary from official duties."

"So it's like a place to relax, wind down?"

The four men nod, their mushroom heads swaying in tandem. Tomorrow night I'm definitely going to have dreams about mushrooms.

"But..." The mushrooms lower their heads all at once. "But since that first day, the Maou has not come in."

"Could it be that we've become tiresome?"

"I fear it's due to the success of her Free and Easy Quest for Love," Anissina says as she inspects the wall, collecting pieces of the broken stones around the vicinity of the hole-- The hole that she obviously created.

The four mushroom men get into a formation with their hands on their knees. "No matter what, we performers must maintain our beautiful appearances. Otherwise, our guest Your Majesty the Maou won't support us, and we would

be rehearsing for nothing if we could never take the stage. For performers like us, it would be a fate worse than death."

So they're dissatisfied with never getting to go on stage?

If I think of it as waiting for baseball season to begin...

It's really very painful.

But even though I'm a huge fan, and I'll feel really impatient, it's got to be a lot more painful for the players themselves.

"After asking about the situation outside, we heard that the previous Maou had abdicated, and Your Majesty had taken office. Therefore, we decided to invite the new king to the Maou Oku."

"Un!"

"That's why we crossed the deserted corridor! We only wished to meet the new His Majesty the Maou!"

"Un, un!"

The responses are getting more and more powerful.

"We hoped that Your Majesty would come see the performance that we worked so hard to rehearse; we awaited Your Majesty's decision concerning the Maou oku. So we first slipped into Her Highness the Princess's room. We recreated the musical from this morning, hoping that we would please Her Highness the Princess enough that she would introduce us to Your Majesty. It was for this reason that we wore our finest costumes, these pure white poofy pants!"

I don't agree with their fashion sense.

"The poofy pants don't have enough impact on their own."

"Yeah! Uh...what? What are you saying, Anissina? I was really scared!"

"But Your Majesty, what if they weren't wearing poofy pants? What if, while on stage, they were wearing thong underwear just like Your Majesty's? Please take a moment to imagine it."

I try to imagine what they would look like in thong underwear.

"Arrest them immediately!"

So much destructive power.

They walk through the dimly lit halls in a line.

Because I accepted Mayo and his friends' request, I'll be going to visit the Maou Oku for the first time since ascending to the throne.

I left Greta asleep on her bed since she's not allowed to stay up late. However, I have no idea what they decided on in the meeting between brothers because Conrad and Wolfram didn't explain anything to me before they both started following me.

That place is supposed to be for the Maou only and no one else is permitted to enter, but since they're both sons of the former Maou, I'm sure it'll be okay. As for Anissina, her proposal was, "As long as we don't provoke 'Harem-sama^[28]', there shouldn't be a problem".

Harem-sama... should be the steward of the whole place.

I'm not a little kid anymore, so of course I know how to show respect to authority figures.

The corridors we pass through are narrow and dim, but not dangerous. We arrive at the entrance to the Maou Oku. The entrance is just a regular door; no one would expect that there's some sort of garden behind that door.

With firm resolve, I nod to my friends and push open the door.

In the midst of the torrents of sound and light, all I can see is a horde of musclemen wearing different colored poofy pants and bow ties, the "official uniform". They all speak in one voice, calling out to me, "Welcome, Your Majesty! We are honored by your presence! Demonic Musclemen, Demonic Musclemen!"

In an instant, it's like the ground beneath me has suddenly vanished
and I'm falling. And my blood pressure drops quickly as the blood drains
out of my face, fingertips, and brain.

"So... So that's what it is..."

So the Maou Oku was an abbreviation for Demonic Musclemen...?[29]

[1]Kohaku Uta Gassen, the "red and white song battle" is a special New Years program that airs on NHK. Popular music artists are invited to the show and divided into red and white teams, which compete against each other.

[2]Bunkasai (文化祭) - Japanese schools (junior high schools, high schools, and universities) hold an annual festival where students can show off what they've done over the year. There are also fun activities, food, dances, plays, etc.

[3]魔男の宅急便 - A reference to Kiki's Delivery Service, which is Witch's Delivery Service (魔女の宅急便) in Japanese, but with female (女) changed to male (男). "Witch" and "warlock" both have the first character 魔 which is also the first character of Maou.

[4]A reference to the Phantom of the Opera. Kabuki is a type of stylized classical Japanese dance-drama.

[5]A reference to the movie Constantine, in which the female lead is a supernatural investigator. "Investigator" (しゅさ) sounds similar to "prodigy" (しゅうさい).

[6]A footnote in the Chinese version says that 'courtesan' sounds like 'lion king' as in the movie The Lion King. The archaic word for courtesan that was used in the Chinese version, 花魁, could also mean...prostitute. I could be way off track and maybe something has been lost in translation, but there is a word in both languages for prostitute, 私娼 (ししょう), which sounds eerily similar to 'lion king' in Japanese. (Suitable for an adult audience? Is Conrad being a perv?)

[7]Eight - 八

[8]In Japan, education is compulsory up until high school. It is not required by law to go to high school.

[9]Yuuri messes up a proverb. It should be "earthquakes, thunder, fires, fathers" (地震雷火事親父) which compares the traditional Japanese father with other things that are generally feared. Fires (火事) sounds like blacksmithing (鍛冶).

[10]Reference to "The King and I". In previous novels, Yuuri has made other connections between Hyscliff and the

King of Siam.

[11] Apparently, Gwendal has a secretary. I think she's named after food, like the maids. An-purin (あんプリン) is short for anko purin, or red bean jam pudding.

[12] Reference to "West Side Story". The word "side" (サイド) sounds like "an inch of land" (すんど).

[13] Possible reference to the song, "On, Wisconsin", the state song of Wisconsin, and also the song of the University of Wisconsin.

[14] Shinjuku is one of the busiest wards in Tokyo, known for having many theatres.

[15] The actress who played Lieutenant Ellen Ripley, the main protagonist of the Alien series.

[16] Filmmaker known for producing low-budget films. He's considered an icon for modern independent filmmakers.

[17] In the shoujo series Glass Mask, "The Crimson Goddess" is the legendary lead role in a play of the same name.

[18] In Japanese, "Predator's data" is romanized to something like "pure deta no deta".

[19] This time it's "puredeta deta", with the second "deta" being 出た, the past tense of "to come out".

[20] Neko Funjatta, translated as "I stepped on a cat", and also known as Der Flohwalzer, or the Flea Waltz. It's popular in Japan as an easy piano duet.

[21] Hibagon is the Japanese Bigfoot or Yeti. It's said to resemble a gorilla, and has supposedly been spotted near Mount Hiba in Hiroshima prefecture.

[22] "Abikyokan" is a four-character idiom composed of the names of two of the Buddhist hells. 阿鼻地獄 - Avici, the lowest level of hell. 大叫喚地獄 - Raurava, the hell of great wailing. The idiom can mean "agonizing cries" and "pandemonium", or it can actually refer to the two hells. I took the non-literal meaning.

[23] Kansai-ben refers to a group of Japanese dialects from the Kansai region, most notably the Osaka dialect. It's often used in comedy routines or in pop culture to denote a person who is somewhat outside of the norm.

[24] A parody of the Cosmo-Cleaner D in the anime Space Battleship Yamato.

[25] Possibly a play on words with the ou oku part sounding like 大蔵, which means "Minister of Finance".

[26] In the Chinese version, this is another pun. The previous machine that caused the sprain was a "merman exercise machine" - merman is written with the characters for fish and person, thus the "fish" in this new machine. "Sprain" is 閃, but "sparkling" is 闪闪. I don't know if the original Japanese pun was similar.

[27] 大奥 translates as "harem", but refers to a place within a palace where the harem resides, not the people that form a harem. It is also roughly equivalent to "concubine's quarters". The title of this story in Japanese is "㊦王奥" which would be romanized to something like "maou oku", with "oku" being short for 大奥 (ōoku). Yuuri deduces that "Maou Oku" is therefore short for "Maou's ōoku" aka "Maou's Harem".

[28] Here, I believe Anissina uses another word for harem, 後 (ko), short for 後宮 (kokyu), lit. a palace's back/inner chambers. This will be important for a later pun/misunderstanding.

[29] The pun is in "demonic musclemen", which (working backwards from Chinese to Japanese) I'm assuming is something like 魔性のキン肉マン, or MASHOU no kinnikUMAN.

1b. The Maou's Harem, part 2

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1b. The Maou's Harem, part 2

Kyou Kara Maou?! (MaruMa Gaiden #4)

Chapter 1: The Maou's Harem

Author: Takabayashi Tomo

Illustrator: Matsumoto Temari

Scans: [Portrait of a Demon King](#)

Chinese version: [魔王后宫 @ Skyfire](#)

English translator: [pyrrhic_victory](#)

Note: This first story in the novel is very long, so it has been split into parts. This is the second half. It's not an arbitrary split, but something that was also done in the original novel, or at least in the Chinese version that I'm working from.

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II

Because my daughter's growing up, I decided to hold the first ever 'Shin Makoku Singing Dancing Family Party' to deepen our bond. It was a success, but the night the curtain fell, we woke up when we heard terrible screaming coming from Greta's room.

When we rushed over to the scene, we saw a bunch of suspicious musclemen in puffy white pants and colorful bow ties.

They introduced themselves as the 'Crazy Hunky Manservant Corps?' while tilting their heads to the side as if they were unsure. They said that they came from the depths of Blood Pledge Castle, from a little known area called the 'Maou Oku', and they were here to reclaim the Maou's attention.

I'm their reluctant master, and I never expected there to be a department in the castle I hadn't heard of before. How did this happen?

So I thought, "I have to check this out right away. I'll observe them before deciding how to deal with them." That's what a Maou would do.

But honestly speaking, I was certain that "Maou Oku = Ōoku = beautiful women the likes of which men can only dream of, all together in a HAREM!" I got carried away with the sexy fantasies and couldn't see the truth at all.

I only discovered it after I'd happily stepped into the room. It was a forest of muscles as far as the eye could see. ...No, it was a dizzying, infinite conga line of muscles.

It turns out that the previous Maou's idea of a harem wasn't having a group of lovely ladies to take care of Her Majesty, but that the Maou Oku was actually an abbreviation for Magical Musclemen.

Can we (mostly me) have our spirits lifted enough by their performance to come to the rescue of the Maou Oku and its strangely dressed inhabitants?

"At the very least, that uniform has got to go."

We enter through the main doors and went down the hall to the theatre. All the staff members are courteous and wearing ties.

The self-proclaimed best bank employee in the world, abbreviated "Super Banker" - that is, my dad - once said, "Wearing a tie is great. Working men become one with their ties, focusing all their drive on job ahead." But the thing is, from the bartender to the card dealer to the security guard, everyone here is topless.

Smiles, sparkling white teeth, topless but for their ties... you'd never see this in a modern banquet.

"At, at least it's better than bunny ears--"

"What's wrong, Yuuri? This should be like the costume for the national sport called sumo in the world you grew up in, which you've surely seen many times before?"

"There are no neckties in sumo!"

Those enthusiastic guys forcefully lead us into the theatre's only box seat to watch the musclemen show.

There's only one set of spectators now, but this theatre looks to be about the same size as NHK Hall ^[1]. Moreover, they seem to be moving around less than the musical; the first actors on stage are standing like muscle sticks.

Little girls and old ladies, all with killer abs. Also, as they near the emotional climax, the crew at once start to perform a jiggling-muscles song number.

They have me unwittingly humming along with the catchy melody:

"Muscle, muscle, muscle, muscles are, the, best--"

"Yuuri, are you in trouble? You've been brainwashed!" Wolfram, who had been stifling his yawns to watch the show with me, smacks my forehead several times.

Close call - I almost turned into a muscle groupie.

The opera ended, and they continued with another musical performance.

As "El Bimbo" started playing, they turn their vertical muscles into horizontal muscles, and then a little hairless animal, "Lucky-chan", climbed over their huge pecs.

Since they're half naked, there's nowhere to hide any props. From this perspective, it's like they're making magic without any tricks.

It's miracle-working, just beauty from purely physical techniques. They used a fantastic mirage to have a white tiger come out of its cage, and then subdued it with their bare hands. As far as white animals go, a lion is good enough^[2].

I take advantage of the break in the program to poke Conrad in the side. He knows more about American culture than I do, though I'm the one who was born on Earth.

"I've never lived there, but doesn't this sort of feel like we're in Las Vegas?"

"It's missing the slot machines."

"I've never seen one of their shows, but doesn't this kind of feel like Takarazuka ^[3]?"

"I think there's a difference in gender... Apologies for my lack of diligence."

"Then what analogy should I use here?"

"I suppose it should be regarded as Your Majesty's exclusive playground." Lord Weller looks depressed. Maybe it's because it's the work of his own mother that's cropped up now and is giving him a major headache.

"But there's no baseball field here, and no scoreboard. We can't even round the bases."

"Because everything here was designed to cater to the tastes of your predecessor."

That is to say, everything here matches up with the interests of the previous Maou, Her Majesty Cecilie von Spitzweg.

This means that, from the golden walls to the dark red carpeting, and even the railings on the stairs covered in gemstones, all of it was decorated according to the previous Maou's wishes?

I can't help feeling a sense of foreboding.

"Does this mean that Cheri-sama likes musclemen?" I look over at Wolfram, who had just been sleeping and was preparing go back to sleep again. It seems like he's really not suited for tasks that involve staying up all night. "It can't be. Even though they say clothes can make the man, they won't completely alter a person."

But even though Wolf is a lot like his mother, I can't deny the possibility that his father could be a really buff man. Maybe in a few years, so fast that I'll be left in the dust, he'll have evolved into a muscleman...

At this point, a man in a light yellow bow tie, Mayonnaise Fried Calamari, also known as Mayo, stealthily pressed close to me while I was muttering to myself.

"Our passionately welcoming performance, how does it suit the new His Majesty the Maou?"

"It-- has something of a dream-like quality... Oh!"

With tearful eyes and fingers intertwined beneath a strong chin, he lifts his head to look at me in the pose of a big dog pretending to be a puppy.

To see the star performer put forth such an expression, who am I to say something negative?

"Um, ah-- It was exciting... I think it was rather exciting... It could be considered exciting... But Mayo, let's not talk about our impressions just yet. First, I have something I want to confirm with you. Are there only musclemen like yourselves here?"

"You mean to say..." Mayo raises one perfectly sculpted eyebrow.

"What I mean is, all I've seen up until now has been a bunch of muscles tumbling around... Sorry, I mean it's all men; there are no women around. From a certain perspective, wouldn't it be common sense that, in a musical not set during a war, there should be one or two softer female roles? So I wanted to ask if there were any cute little sisters or handsome ladies or any sexy women coming forth."

"Ah!" The man in the light yellow bow tie claps his hands once. He flashes a smile, blindingly white teeth glinting in the light. "If you're looking for a more handsome crossdresser, we have plenty of them here. Their physiques are a bit less than ours, but surely they can use their faces to make up for the lack... So is that how it is, that Your Majesty the new king prefers someone with a more natural charisma?"

"Eh? You're mistaken; I don't like crossdressers, I like real women."

He gently caresses his chin with a finger, "hmms" to himself while continuously nodding, and completely ignores my words.

"I truly regret that this point has completely slipped my mind. I shall immediately make an announcement calling for a nationwide search for pretty boys."

"Whoa! Don't do that! Seriously, please don't ever do such a thing!"

It looks like he's still ignoring me and is ready to put his plan into action. I try to grab Mayo's arm to block him, but because his oiled body is so slick, he slips out of my grasp-- The fact that he's made himself so slick and shiny is also worth noting.

But thinking back on what Mayo just said, it's obviously that my previous train of thought was wrong. The reason why the group is solely composed of beautiful men must be because theirs is an art that strictly prohibits women from joining.

Thinking about it more carefully, since the previous Maou was Cheri-sama, of course she wouldn't have women in her harem. Instead, it's chock full of men from all across the country.

It's just a fact of life.

I was confused by my fantasies of what a harem should be, and had such unrealistic expectations. I even dreamed that, on arriving here, I would finally be able to leave behind this life without women.

"I should have figured this out sooner..."

Wolfram, half asleep, lifts his head to look at me and mumbles:

"Yuuri, your eyes look dead."

"Wolf, let him be. His Majesty has just taken a step up the ladder to adulthood."

I watch as the older brother keeps the younger brother in check on my behalf. But then again, his thoughts are somewhat different from mine.

"He's in the process of deciding how to refit the Maou Oku so that it reflects his own tastes..."

"I'm not, I'm not really making any plans?"

The second son of the Maou Oku's previous master puts forth an unexpected expression, his mouth forming into a surprised O.

In desperation, I wave my right hand in front of my face. "A dissolution--! It'll simply be dissolved!"

"Y-your Majesty, what did you just say?" Mayo's face contorts into an expression of exaggerated surprise. It looks like his jaw was about to fall off.

"I said dissolved. The Maou Oku that Cheri-sama created is henceforth disbanded. Starting today, you all are now

free to leave this cloistered place."

The other members of the Maou Oku, having just finished their performance, wipe off their sweat and start coming this way.

Each and every one of them has an expression brimming with satisfaction at having done a successful show.

I stand up from the luxurious box seat and clap three times to get their attention. I raise my voice so that the ones in back can also hear me, and I say as if I'm a famous director:

"Everyone, your acting was wonderful. So far, I've seen the most brilliant of performances, thank you. Though the happy memories ended too quickly, I've really appreciated being able to witness your great performances. Don't you agree, Wolf? Right, Conrad?"

"Ah? Yes."

"That's absolutely correct."

Hearing nothing but full praise from the audience, the performers raise their fists and shout out their joy.

I'm an idiot when it comes to art, but I still jumped in with a review of your performance - really sorry about that.

"And there's also something else I'd like to tell everyone: thank you all for your dedicated service to the Maou; it's been tough on you!"

Conrad frowns a little as he lifts his head to look at me. It seems like he wants to say something, but he's hesitating.

"In order to commend you for your contribution, I intend to forever preserve this corner of Blood Pledge Castle as the Maou Oku Theatre. However, the previous Maou who brought you all here isn't in the country right now. She's out traveling the world on a quest for free love. So from today on, this troupe is dissolved, and all your duties have been lifted!"

The men suddenly go pale. They start whispering to each other in confusion.

"There's no mistress for you to look after anymore, so you can all go home now!"

"Wait! Please wait, Your Majesty!"

Mayo can't hide the uncertainty in his heart, and he doesn't know how best to handle the situation, but he figures he should speak up anyway. As the representative of the Maou Oku, he cannot take this in silence.

"You're dissolving us? We're truly being dissolved? Th-that is, His Majesty the new king has no interest in us at all? This... h-how can this be... They were hand-picked by Her Majesty the previous Maou? They're all among the handsomest men from across the land?"

"What you say is true... Indeed, they're all very handsome men--"

Stop it, fantasies. Hello, cruel world.

I never thought that I would have such poor luck with the ladies that even my harem of hand-picked beauties would turn into a troupe of singing, dancing musclemen.

"But, you see, I'm also a man. I'm unable to see your performances as a relaxing getaway."

In an instant, Mayo's expression turns to one of sorrow, like he'd just lost his seven cute children ^[4] and is about to

cry. "Is that why you have not enjoyed yourself?"

"That's not it. I had a great time watching, how could I not have enjoyed it? And I understand that your art is one that allows only men. There are some traditional performance arts that do things this way, like Kabuki, or Noh, or the ballet group that my mom buys tickets to every year - they're like that, too. It's just, in a sense, this is supposed to be my personal amusement park or nightlife paradise, except it's not. It's really very different."

Countless pairs of eyes are glued to their new master as his arms and legs gesture in ever more excited movements. How many people are there in this troupe?

"The most important thing is, what Cheri-sama wants in a playmate is different from what I want. Eh... Do you know what I mean? That person's always saying 'I think there's a man who likes me--' but for me, I'd hope for there to be girls who will like me. On top of that, I've never been a person who likes the nightlife. Or, more precisely, I should say that I'm usually too tired after baseball practice to do anything other than sleep in the evenings."

To my side, Wolfram abruptly nods in his sleep.

"So that's why I have no need for the Maou Oku. To keep you all here would be to forever have you rehearsing without a chance to perform. Isn't that meaningless?"

A memory of how I was two years ago suddenly flashes in my mind.

Always hoping that there would be a chance for me to be called in to play as a pinch hitter while remaining benched at every game, I practiced batting every day to prepare for a chance that I didn't know would ever come.

But I never did get to set foot in the field, nor did I ever get the opportunity to accept the crowd's applause.

"Isn't that meaningless?"

Since it's like that, what's needed is a change in the environment. A new world where one can continue to work hard. Doing this is also out of consideration for them. Perhaps there's another place with a baseball team that needs me; perhaps there's another place where people welcome you with pats on the back.

I was looking to the sky as I thought this, but now I shift back to see the puzzled expressions on the Magical Musclemen before me.

"What? You can go home now. And once you've gone back, you can start a new life. It's also okay if you want to stay here. If you're willing, you can join a new theatrical group and continue to perform. You're free to choose without obeying any government officials... That's not - I mean, you don't have to put up with any bullying or court politics to keep the king's favor."

I don't know if there's any bullying going on here. I think my speech is getting mixed up with the feel of historical dramas about imperial concubines.

"But, that-- Your Majesty..." blue bow tie Glenn finally says. The tone of his voice makes it sound like he needs to go to the bathroom, but is being forced to hold it in. "Even if you asked us to leave, we have no hometowns to return to."

"Ah, aren't you all from this country?"

"That's not what he means, Your Majesty." Conrad, who had been silent for a long while, says in a low and steady voice, "In order to work at the Maou Oku, these men have all received specialized higher education, learning skills that will please the Maou. Just removing their posts will not solve their behavior - that they will still be accustomed to acting in this exaggerated, eye-catching manner. I'm afraid they won't be able to lead normal lives among the

general populace."

With what his sympathetic tone implied, the naked bow ties were filled with remorse. They lower their heads and remain silent.

But what is this so-called "specialized higher education" supposed to be?

I'm really want to know, but then I think it'll turn out to be something I actually didn't want to know. But then I also think that it'd be better if I knew, since it might come in handy later.

"Do you still want to fire them?"

"Fire...! Well, what do you want me to do instead?"

And here I thought Conrad was going to help me, when it was the opposite.

He's made me lose a lot of the energy I had before.

"We beg Your Majesty to reconsider!"

"Waaah!" Puffy pants and bow ties are surrounding me, all of them kneeling and begging with their hands clasped together. Their muscular shoulders, oiled as they are, still shine with a fearsome light.

"If you have even the slightest thread of pity for us, please keep us on, let us stay within the castle walls!"

"D-do I have to keep you hired? Why don't you try joining another theatre group?" I look around and couldn't help but be overwhelmed at the scene, filled to bursting with handsome musclemen. "So many people... Won't it be hard?"

Their well-developed muscles are topped with sweat and oil, flashing across their skin. I've been thinking for a while now that it's strange. Just how many people are there?

Wolfram, who had been dozing off to the side, suddenly pushes up from his chair.

"Whaaa-- What's that flashing, why's the whole ground flashing!"

"Because their beauty oil dripped off and flowed over here. Careful, Wolf, you shouldn't fall asleep right after looking at this kind of thing! You'll definitely have nightmares."

"I wasn't sleeping! Caught in this kind of situation, how could it be possible to sleep!"

The third son, whose face was prettier than those of the Maou Oku, said this while tightly squeezing my hands, his expression appearing especially serious.

"And also, I, too, approve of the dissolution of this organization. What you said about 'not looking for men', you said it very well! Atta wimp, Yuuri."

"I can't tell if you're praising me or insulting me, but I want to clear something up. I never said I wasn't looking for men, just that I don't enjoy the nightlife. I don't enjoy the nightlife!"

His palm feels warmer than usual, maybe because of the excited atmosphere. The previous Maou's son shouts like he has the sun running through his veins and he's about to explode.

"Who cares! In any case, this kind of disgraceful organization ought to be dissolved as quickly as possible. Mother is so unbearable, her pleasure seeking has gone too far! Has she even thought of what her status means to the nation? To go as far as to waste national funds on such useless things... Yuuri, what is it? Why do you look so

weird?"

Surprisingly, he supports my proposal, making me feel somewhat touched. It's probably that this has already showed up in my facial expression.

Oh my god! How surprising that Lord Wolfram von Bielefeld would actually say those words.

Wolfram, who I keep saying is a willful brat, unexpectedly had negative things to say about his mother, Her Majesty the former Queen.

"I think this is a really tough situation. This must be the first time you've openly criticized Cheri-sama, right? Have you brothers come to that conclusion together?"

"No."

Unexpectedly, Lord Weller shakes his head. It looks like the brothers' negotiations failed.

So Wolfram supports my decision; Conrad is against it.

Well I didn't see that one coming.

Having not yet come to a decision regarding the fate of the Maou Oku, it wouldn't do to just chase them out and end the negotiations that way. However, I feel as if I want to purposely keep avoiding that talk.

Who taught those musclemen to beg in such a frightening way.

They start to weep, lament the awfulness of this world, and they all kneel together.

"If Your Majesty has the least bit of pity for us, please keep us hired, let us stay within the castle walls! Please take pity on us--!"

"Please take pity on us!"

A whole colony of able-bodied adults flattering, charming, and begging the newly crowned wimp king. It must look hilarious to others. Having been unsettled by their groveling attitudes, I unconsciously mutter, "I'm sympathetic to you. Will you be happy now?"

"What?"

But I can't act coldly to them with their big, watery puppy eyes.

"Nothing, it's really nothing. I was just thinking for a bit, that although there's no need for nightlife entertainment within castle, and that won't change, it doesn't mean I have to undermine your existence. I'll think carefully on how to deal with this situation when I go back."

"Oh, such benevolent and heartfelt words! Thank you, thank you so much, Your Majesty!"

"No need for thanks, this is my job-- Letting everyone live a comfortable life is my job."

Mayo adjusts his bow tie, then "Ta da!" he shoots out a finger. Red bow tie and blue bow tie exit from the side of the main doors to send in two round objects.

"It may be but an insignificant gift, but Your Majesty is welcome to choose a souvenir."

Two pots of the same size and shape. If there weren't sheets of paper pasted on them, it would have been impossible to tell them apart.

One sheet is red, and the other, which looks about to peel off, is blue.

Short sentences are written on them in flowing calligraphy. They wouldn't be curses, would they?

"Should I choose the red one or the blue one... Seems like I've heard that phrase before. Did you want me to pick one of the two?"

Mayo, his face full of smiles, nods in response.

Since it's a souvenir, it should be a "pretty good item". However, seeing how they've been placed by either side of the entrance, the feeling is like that of guardian lions warding off evil spirits^[5].

"These have been preserved from when the Maou Oku was completed, and were given to us to guard. According to Cheri-sama, they are unique among the world's valuables."

"Okay-- I like blue, so I'll just pick this one with the blue paper on it... Oh, wait a sec! If I open this, it won't pour out white smoke and turn me into an old man, centuries pass in the blink of an eye, that type of thing?"

Wolfram unconsciously keeps his distance from the pot. Lord Weller can't help but smile as he says, "Your Majesty, how could that be? It's not like in the story of Urashima Taro^[6]."

"Conrad... Are you the reincarnation of Dave Spector^[7]?"

Speaking of Dave Spector, he's still alive and well.

That's how things came to be, that right now, in front of me is a brown pot with a diameter of about twenty centimeters.

The measurements are just about right for an ordinary family to use it for pickling plums. There are cracks on the upper part, and covered with a water-blue cloth tied tightly with a cord.

"It wouldn't really be pickled plums inside, would it?"

I hum the muscle song that's been stuck in my head as I pace around the souvenir.

It's very lightweight, and it there aren't any sounds coming from within.

Wolfram doesn't care that it's morning already; he's still sleeping. Conrad's getting tea, so I'm the only one in the living room with the pot, staring at it with one eye squinted.

People always say not to eat things if you don't know where they came from, but this is in Blood Pledge Castle, and it's something that was from Cheri-sama's loyal servants in the Maou Oku. It's probably not poisoned?

Setting that thought aside for now, I'm not even sure there's actually food inside. Even though it does look like there are tasty pickled plums in there, I'll be fine as long as I don't eat them, right?

I can't stop myself from slowly untying the cord and lifting the cloth covering.

It doesn't smell like pickled plums.

It also lacks any sort of moldy odor even though it hasn't been opened for a long time. There's no odor at all.

"Did I pick the wrong one?"

I think to myself for a moment, "So the red one was the grand prize?" as I move to take a peek inside--

"KA-KA-KA-KA-KA!!"

"Aaah!"

A distorted sphere flies out along with the sound of a taiko drum. When it hits my face, it feels like a deflated rubber ball.

It doesn't hurt, but it scares me so much that I tip over my chair and fall to the ground.

"Yuuri?"

Lord Weller just returned from the kitchen and he doesn't even have time to set down the teapot before he rushes to my side.

As for that rubber ball, it keeps bouncing from wall to wall. It flies around the room like an automatic squash ball.

It's so fast that I can't follow it with my eyes; all I can see are blue lines.

All of a sudden it hits the ceiling and comes straight down at me.

I scramble away to protect myself.

"Conra... Wow, I feel... I feel like I'm... Ahhh--!"

The thing turned too quickly and hit the chair, but then it rebounded and now it's crawling into my...my...!

"There's something in my pants!"

"Calm down, please calm down!"

In order to prevent me from struggling, Conrad wraps both hands tightly around my leg. Because of this, my back is plastered to the ice-cold floor.

"Shh-- Please stay still for a moment."

He wants me to stay still, but that weird ball is inside my clothes, twisting around! I'm scared and I'm disgusted and I can't calm down.

I want to take off my pants right away and toss them into a washing machine. But that warm rubber ball has suddenly lost its elasticity. Now it's stopped in the vicinity of my right knee.

It doesn't feel like rubber anymore. Now it's like slime stuck to my leg.

"Uh, I think... It stopped on my leg."

"You don't need to say anything."

"I think... It's stuck to my knee."

Maybe I'm just being paranoid, but Lord Weller's expression looks very serious.

"I'll help you confirm it. Are you ready? I'm going to roll up your pants."



He carefully pulls up the pant leg. I'm not brave enough to look, so all I can do is look up at the ceiling. What the hell is on my right leg?

"Lord Weller?"

There's no response. It's the same with that thing; as soon as it attached to my leg, it stopped moving.

"Conrad?"

"Your Majesty..."

His reply is mixed with a sigh. With my right leg half-exposed to the cold air, I'm getting goosebumps.

"Calling me 'Your Majesty' again, it's r-really unbearable. D-don't call me that. You're the one who named me... Has something bad happened?"

"I think it's better if you don't look..." With these words, Conrad lifts his head with a heavy expression. "On your knee, there's a Thomas the Tank Engine."

"What--?"

As I sit up, my neck and shoulders crack painfully, but the reason my face is so pale isn't because of the pain. It has more to do with the impact of what I'm seeing.

There's a round blue thing in the middle of my right knee. And this thing, it has, it has a face. A face!

"Wah! And it's smiling! It can't be. Is it a face? Is it really a face? What the hell is this! Conrad, what is this thing?"

"As I said, it's a Thomas the Tank Engine..."

"I think it looks more like the blue drum in Taiko no Tatsujin^[8], doesn't it? Its eyes are all round and it has that smiley face. Was the blue one Wada Don, or was it Wada Katsu?"

Now is definitely not the time to go, "Wow! What a nice shiny blue color!" in an attempt to escape reality.

"Why is Wada Katsu on my knee?"

"I think this is called a 'facial tumor'. I was too careless; I should not have left you alone."

Lord Weller puts his hand to his forehead, as if he's blaming himself for having committed a mistake. Once again, I fall backward. The back of my head hits the stone floor. I've pretty much calmed down now.

"I never expected a facial tumor would be hiding in the souvenir."

"It was my fault for opening it. I'm sorry; this was a result of my actions."

"No, the ones at fault are the musclemen who dared present such dangerous goods to the king. If we let Günter know, they'll be punished severely and it'll be over."

It can't be that the red one was the grand prize, and this is the "thanks for your patronage"? It's just like in the story, "The Tongue-Cut Sparrow^[9]". Because I took the "thanks for your patronage", there was a monster inside.

"But luckily it's in a place that I can hide under my clothes. That way no one has to find out before I'm cured. But... even if it was on my neck, it would be all right."

Conrad gives me a pained smile and then lets go of my leg.

"It's actually something that children like. It's very cute."

Save me, Fat Controller^[10].

Unfortunately, our plan to hide this ailment has failed because of a certain person who can't ever mind her own business.

Because of the Red Demoness.

She kicks down the door at full power. She even has in her hands two thin golden rods bent into 90 degree angles, and points them at me, making me tremble.

"Aha! This is the room, this is the room! Behold, this maryoku-powered detector, 'Dowsing-kun' is reacting strongly! It's here, it must be here? It's here, isn't it?"

"Good morning, Lady Anissina."

Lady Anissina von Karbelnikoff lifts her chin to regard me with her clear blue eyes. "Ah, Your Majesty." Then she slowly shifts her line of sight downwards to the new face stuck to my knee. "Ah, it's Pot-sama."

"You know this thing?"

"Of course I know."

She sets down the strange metal rods and, with an expression of astonishment, crosses her arms over her chest. She taps the stone floors with the sharp point of a shoe.

"Haven't I warned you before? Beware of 'Pot-sama'!"

Isn't "Harem-sama" supposed to be the harem's steward?^[11]

"We'll use the drying method," Lady von Karbelnikoff says while sitting beside us and elegantly sipping at her tea. We're anxious even as we eat breakfast, constantly worrying about how to deal with the facial tumor.

Also sitting next to her is Greta, who's desperately trying to imitate her.

"If we dry it out, there should be no problem. All we have to do is remove the moisture content from the thing attached to His Majesty. As it dries, it will naturally fall off."

"Haa-- Lady Anissina, please don't be so straightforward. What you're saying is that we just have to use a maryoku powered blow-dryer?"

"No, no, we can't use that. If we blow a little cold air on it, Pot-sama will jump inside. Actually, Blue Pot-sama is very afraid of cold, so it's drawn to warm places. It will slowly make its way towards warmth."

Jump inside. Jump inside where? It can't mean in my thigh or crotch, can it? Without realizing it, I reach out and grip the tablecloth. Just thinking about it is making my hair stand up on end. Conrad is also feeling quite uncomfortable. Conrad, I forbid you from making a cold joke right now.

"What~? Yuuri, is there a puppy in your pants?"

Because we didn't want to scare her, we haven't told Greta about the facial tumor. Sitting between the Poison Lady she idolizes and her most beloved (I wish) father, she happily stuffs her mouth full of fresh-baked bread.

"Greta, you're not a little kid anymore. How could there be a puppy in my pants? It would be great if it were a puppy... Wait, how do you know about this, Anissina?"

She set down the teacup and raised her chin. "Because I invented it."

Gwendal's tragic cry of "Please don't invent such things!" rings through my mind.

"Back then, Cheri-sama said, 'Oh-- Anissina, I'd love it if you could create a guardian that won't let anyone into the Maou Oku~'," Anissina says as she clasps her elbows to her chest, wriggling her body back and forth in imitation. "So I accepted the commission."

It's probably true. If it was Cheri-sama, there's a strong possibility that something like this happened. No wonder they were placed near that unused corridor.

"That being the case, Lady Anissina must have an antidote, right? There's got to be a powerful antidote that can get this Wada Katsu off of my body!"

"Yuuri, is Wada Katsu the name of the puppy? Greta thinks Kishiwada ^[12] sounds better than Wada Katsu--"

Please stop trying to name it. Lady Karbelnikoff narrows her eyes at me, and as she sees that I'm trying to cover it up, she lets out a knowing smile and says, "Of course there's an antidote. To be more accurate, I should say that there used to be one. Once applied to the affected area, Pot-sama would quickly become freeze-dried. Then it would fall off; that was the miracle cure, 'Pot Spot Remover'. I regret to say that my supplies of 'Pot Spot Remover' were stolen during the war because it was also an effective treatment for foot blisters."

Lord Weller lifts his head to regard the ceiling, looking like he has a secret.

"Well, how about I create a new antidote? No, Your Majesty, there's no need for hesitation! Creating medication with a similar effect will be a piece of cake for me." Lady Anissina von Karbelnikoff flipped her red hair and held up two pale fingers. "Just give me twenty days!"

That's a really long time. Greta, who doesn't even know what's going on, starts to worship her again. Danger! It appears that she has a tendency to become addicted to Poison Ladies.

"That's no good, Anissina. I can't wait that long."

Conrad can't stand to watch anymore; he can't help but intervene. "If he has to live with it for twenty days, Yuuri might develop feelings for it and wouldn't want it to leave."

"The facial tumor? I'll develop feelings for the facial tumor? No way, absolutely no way!"

They're not listening to the host's objections.

"Oh, I see. It is rather cute."

"It's not cute, it's not cute at all!"

"What? The puppy? Is it the puppy?"

"Your Majesty, though you are kind-hearted, you must not go too far."

"Never mind that, can you people not listen to me at all--!"

The three are silent at once, in a "Then we'll listen to you," sort of atmosphere.

"Listen to me, Greta, there is no..." As I take a deep breath, preparing to clarify things with her, I hear five rapid knocks on the door. "Puppy... Who's there?"

I've just been interrupted. It's Günter's subordinate, Dacascos, politely knocking at the door. Conrad stands up from his seat.

"What have you come here for, so early in the morning? His Majesty is still having breakfast."

"I'm so sorry, but I'm actually here for Your Excellency."

"Looking for me?"

Dacascos gingerly rubs his bald head, fingers sliding over his scalp. "Yes. I can't find His Excellency Günter and His Excellency Gwendal. I can't report back until I've gotten them to sign this form for army provisions. Has someone ordered the soldiers to carry more preserved foods? The child doing the deliveries has been waiting since yesterday, but the person in charge has just gotten sick and is laid up in bed."

Although I know where Lord von Voltaire is, I can't talk about that here.

Unless I want to make an enemy of the woman sitting here, calmly sipping her tea, then I really can't say anything more.

"Ordered more... I remember now; it was the dehydrated vegetables. They're being sent here for the new recruits who are going to be training to deal with shipwrecks."

Greta leaned forward as soon as she heard the words 'dehydrated vegetables'. "Is Pachiri still here? Those dried veggies were sent by Pachiri, right?"

I know I've heard that name before, but I can't remember who it is.

It was just yesterday, but it feels like so long ago.

Who's Pachiri? Greta's friend?

"Greta said very impolite things to Pachiri. I said that I hated dried vegetables the most, but those dried vegetables were made from hard work by Pachiri and the headmistress and everyone at the orphanage. I said that I hated them...so I have to apologize to him!"

She's barely ten years old. She has no idea that the adults around her are aware of her feelings. Although the words that she blurted out really hurt the other kid, they'll both be able to make up.

"Dacascos, can I go look for Pachiri?"

I've got it! I slam my hand onto the table and the teacups shake; the spoons clank.

"Yeah, Pachiri! The preserved food!"

"Your Majesty?"

Lord Weller, his hands holding the document, is surprised. Greta is anxiously fiddling with her hands while Anissina raises her beautiful eyebrows.

He's the kid we met backstage yesterday, who put the white flower in our star actress' hair. He said he was at Blood Pledge Castle to deliver army rations, and that he happened to come across the auditorium on his way back.

"Conrad, it's that rapid freeze-drying method! FREEZE DRY! We heard what Pachiri said about the head of the orphanage being an expert in preserving foods, so can't we just use their drying method to peel this thing off? Let's go find the food preservation expert. Be happy, Greta! Today we're going to have a picnic outside of the castle!"

"Really--?"

This is great. Hold on, facial tumor. I'll ask the headmistress to personally turn you into jerky. And then when you're just a large scab, you'll fall off by yourself.

When we head down to visit the boy, light is flashing off his strawberry blond hair as he shakes his head back and forth. He seems very interested in the man on the cargo pallet.

Of course, this is also only natural.

Like a deflated ball, the person sitting on the back of Pachiri's delivery carriage is none other than Mayo of the Maou Oku. He's hugging the brown pot set atop his knees, and his head droops as if in mourning. Even the muscles he's so proud of seem to have been affected by his depression.

It was because he didn't know "Pot-sama" was a Karbelnikoff trap that he treated it as a gift worthy of sending to his master.

This time I've really poked through a super-deep basket.^[13]

It's a far cry from trying to promote the Maou Oku. He's lucky he's not being charged for attempted assassination.

Personally, I'm not that angry at him, but from just a while ago, he's been shouting that he should cut his abs as repentance. But... Your abs are already cut. As he sighed for the 49th time, his pale yellow bow tie drooped and quivered along with him.

The problem is that, no matter how sad he is or how much he regrets his actions, just one look at the way he's dressed makes him seem insincere.

"May I ask... Your Majesty, is Mr. Mayo always naked?"

"He has a special fondness for white pants."

It's more tactful to say that they would have trouble integrating into society due to their exaggerated mannerisms. The rude way to say it is that it has to do with the way they dress.

The boy, not understanding the situation, is full of admiration as he says, "He gives the feeling of being a very unique individual."

I don't think he'd be able to imagine that I've already been surrounded by hundreds of those exact same unique individuals, or that I tried to get them jobs.

They were also the ones responsible for my suffering this unspeakable thing on my body that I now have to secretly find help for.

"Anyway... Pachiri, your headmistress is good at drying foods, and can even flash-freeze them?"

"It shouldn't be a problem. The headmistress is an expert in this field. Even before she became the headmistress of the orphanage, they called her a 'withered old woman', and the villagers all fear and respect her very much. They say that if he even taps you with a single finger, you'll shrivel up."

"That's great! Seems like she'd be able to dry up the Thomas the Tank Engine on my right knee."

It doesn't hurt or itch at all, and actually it's not too inconvenient a thing.

However, I know that it has a tendency to move inward because it's afraid of the cold, so it'd be best to get rid of it

now.

Greta, sitting behind Conrad, asks me, "Can we go there?"

"Of course we can... Hey, Greta! Careful!"

"Don't worry--"

Without hearing the rest of her reply, I see that she's already leapt from my horse's back and into the carriage. Finding her balance, she crawls into the spot beside the driver's seat. At first they had some misgivings about each other, but pretty soon it felt like they were friends. Greta twines a finger into Pachiri's curls as she says, "It smells like vegetables in the back."

"Not like meat? It was dried meats back there just now."

"Un."

She lets out another "un", nods her head and bites her lips. "About that... Pachiri, I'm sorry."

Pachiri stares at her as if in shock, like not even in his dreams could he imagine that a princess would apologize to him.

"What for?"

"Because I said 'dried vegetables are the worst!' I'm so sorry. Wasn't it something the orphanage worked very hard to make? But then I blurted out something so rude, so I'm really sorry."

Pachiri tilts his head a little and says, "Greta, before..."

Just then, when she spoke while hugging her knees, there was a slight trembling in her voice. I'm at a loss for what to do, thinking that she might be crying, but it turns out that my worry is unnecessary because she quickly becomes cheerful-sounding again.

"Before, all I had to eat were dried vegetables and meats. Because those were the only foods I could get hold of. So I started to hate them because they're hard and have no flavor. And they also make me think of the times when I had no one by my side, when there was only darkness around me, and everything was only ever about the stones."

"Your Highness the princess has had a dark past?" her new friend asks. He doesn't understand what happened to her.

I'm also surprised, and I mutter to myself, "Really? How long did you live like that?"

But there's just one thing I truly want to ask.

Greta, right now you...

She flings her auburn hair back with a shake of the head, straightens out her knees and sticks her legs out.

"But things are different now! I can eat lots of different kinds of foods. If I eat dried vegetables now, I'll definitely think they're great. Because I'm not feeling lonely anymore."

The boy blinks a few times, staring at Greta's shoulder that's about to touch his own. It's like he can't believe this child could have had such a painful past. He continues to show his pure smile and says, "Are you saying that just to make me feel better?"

"As if! Greta is now Yuuri's child, but it's not like I'm one of those sheltered ladies who's never seen the outside

world! It's true that all I had to eat in the past were dried vegetables and meats, and maybe some rats - it's not a big deal."

Greta, upon discovering that Pachiri doesn't believe her, is able to make her horrid past out to be a joke. She's truly a cheerful child.

I want to hug her tightly to myself. If there were no people around, that's what I would do.

"When you bite them, they make crunching sounds."

"You just eat them dry? That's not right; you're not a soldier. They're supposed to be soaked in water first, and then seasoned before eating. Even on the battlefield it's the same deal. If you want, I could teach you. I know how to make them taste really good. If you want to get them soft, it's faster with boiling water."

Pachiri says this all in one breath, then lowers his head and laughs. His slim shoulders shake along with the laughter.

"That Your Highness the princess can gnaw on dried vegetables... You weren't playing a space-food game?"

"Why would I?"

"Because wasn't it in the lyrics? It said that on one side was the ultimate warrior, and the other side gnawed on space-food. Though I don't know what it was they were gnawing on."

Maybe Pachiri thought singing it would be faster than explaining. He lifts his eyes to the sky and starts to sing the song that he heard not so long ago.

"Humans are so troublesome! To outer space for a big fight!"

No matter how many times I hear it, the lyrics still sound so stupid to me. However, his singing voice is as beautiful as before. This heavenly boy's treble is his innate gift.

Even though I think it's best not to interrupt the kids' conversation as the third wheel, I still can't help but praise him.

"That was great, perfectly done! I think your singing voice is beautiful! It's just like an angel's; so much that I think you'll sprout wings!"

"Thank you for the kind words, Your Majesty. But only kotsuhizoku have wings."

"A-although it's the word of Your Majesty..."

Pachiri jumps and almost lets go of the reins upon hearing Mayo of the Maou Oku suddenly enter the conversation; I was also almost thrown off my horse. He was just sitting there, head lowered and sighing continuously as he hugged the pot, and then he suddenly springs up to say what?

"He still cannot be considered perfect."

Using the defense of "Because he's still a child?" won't work with this man, who is also one of Shin Makoku's leading performance artists. He wears a very solemn expression as he sits, flexing his muscles. Don't you feel cold only wearing those puffy pants?

"As he sang 'To outer space for a big fight!', the last note was unstable. I was also unable to see into his heart, and so was not emotionally moved. To put it another way, he wasn't into the role."

"You don't have to be so harsh to a child..."

"No, Your Majesty. He should improve himself!" He looks unwilling to compromise. "You should try singing the last note straight instead of sliding into it."

The man dressed in only puffy pants and a bow tie is giving Pachiri directions. It'd be hard not to be scared.

However, even though Pachiri is at a bit of a loss, he listens to the instructions and sings it once again. The muscleman immediately smiles.

"That's it-- Great, just like that!" Mayo pats the boy's back to show his praise. If the patting continues, that slender body will be sent flying.

I think to myself that I ought to stop this, but as I extend my right hand--

"This time I'll teach you how to express emotions. Remember this simple exercise. Anyone can do it."

"Anyone?"

"That's right. Don't worry, you're sure to be able to learn this right away."

Hearing this, the boy's eyes flash with curiosity. Perhaps because he wants to learn it quickly, he turns his whole body around to glance behind him.

I pull back the hand that had been about to stop Mayo, and use it instead to grab hold of the blue-colored reins, slowly pulling up even with Lord Weller's horse. Because I want to take advantage of this time while I still remember, I tell him the things that just crossed my mind.

"Don't you think Mayo's well-suited for being a teacher?"

"A teacher?" Conrad looks at me with a tiny wrinkling of his brow. He hesitates, and doesn't speak further.

However, his lips and facial muscles relax, and I know he's smiling. That's his "I knew it" expression.

"Of course, provided that he wears actual clothes."

Mayo, crawling over the distance to the coachman's seat, presents Pachiri with another problem.

"Why do they go to outer space for a big fight? If you can describe the situation clearly, as well as put your all into understanding the feelings, you will most definitely be able to move others. Why do you want to send your troops to outer space?"

"Why..." Pachiri removes one hand from the reins to scratch his ear. He's probably never considered this problem before. "I just think, if they were to fight so fiercely on the ground, it would involve a lot more people, so it's too dangerous. Because on the ground... there's Her Highness the princess and His Majesty."

The temporary instructor, a proud expression on his face, lifts up a finger and wags it. He's happy to the point of almost leering at the people around him.

"Then I invite you to sing a new song."

"Eh? I can't do something like that!"

"You can! You just need to use your feelings for Her Highness the princess; put into words how you see her in your heart. It's because there's an important person here that you would think to move the battle to outer space, so you let those feelings pour over your mind and sing it out. Try it!"

The boy's cheeks light up in a faint blush, and after saying a few words he begins to sing. However, because of the

wind kicking up, we're unable to hear the lyrics.

Still, it's enough for Greta, who sits at his side.

She suddenly reaches out with both her delicate hands to pull Pachiri tightly to her. There's simply no way for us to interfere.

The boy is red all the way down his neck now.

I don't know whether I should look shocked or if I should sigh, because there's no time for me to even utter a sound. In my mind, the passage of time is flowing off by itself; it keeps showing the events of what might happen a few days later.

We'll arrive at Pachiri's home, Pot-sama will be removed, and I will immediately return to the castle.

After that--

Don't you think he'd make a great teacher?

The performers of the Maou Oku will be invited to become teachers of the arts, going to schools all across the country. Their salary will be the same as before, so there will be no need to worry about the budget.

I don't know if this is a good idea, and maybe someone will object, and it will still be a problem to decide where to send each person. Basically, it's not something that's so easily done.

It would also be worrisome if things advanced too smoothly. After all, this is a proposal from me, who's an amateur when it comes to politics and public policy.

But I still wish to be the one to make this happen, and to be there to see the results with my own eyes.

Greta, laughing along with the boy, turns her head to me. "Yuuri, listen! Pachiri..."

I pretend that I'm not the type of father to worry about little things; I lift up my right hand to wave back.

Until the time when that issue is settled... No, even if it's never settled, I'm going to tell Wolfram that my daughter has embraced a man that's not her father, and then the two of us will have a pity party together. We'll be so idiotically depressed that it'll surprise Greta.

It's okay if we're laughed at for being childish.

Because having a close parent-child relationship only lasts for a short time, for the ten or so years before middle school.

[1] [NHK Hall](#) is where the annual Kōhaku Uta Gassen is held.

[2] Referring to either Kimba the White Lion, or Leo, the mascot of the Saitama Seibu Lions baseball team.

[3] Takarazuka - an all-female performance troupe.

[4] A reference to the lyrics of a Japanese children's song, [Nanatsu no Ko](#) (七つの子), "Seven Baby Crows", where a mother crow cries for her seven cute children.

[5] Guardian lions are common statues placed by entrances as symbols of protection and prosperity. The original reference was to a specific type of guardian lion, the [Okinawan Shisa](#).

[6] In the legend of Urashima Taro, the titular character rescues a turtle and is invited to a beautiful palace under the sea. The turtle turns out to be a princess who, when he asks to return to land, gives him a box which she tells him not to open. He opens it anyway, when he finds out that 3 days underwater was 300 years on land. White smoke comes pouring out that turns him into an old man, because inside the box was his old age.

[7] Dave Spector - a foreign celebrity in Japan (AKA the token white guy you sometimes see in Japanese films). In this case, Yuuri is saying that Conrad is a non-Japanese person who knows a lot about Japanese culture.

[8] Taiko no Tatsujin - a series of rhythm games played with a controller that resembles a taiko drum. One game has been released in North America as Taiko: Drum Master. The mascots are two drums, Don and Katsu. Don is the orange-faced drum; Katsu is the blue-faced drum. There's also a [ridiculously cute anime](#)...

[9] [The Tongue-Cut Sparrow](#) is a Japanese folktale with a moral about the consequences of greed. In brief, a sparrow offers an old man a choice of two baskets. The old man chooses the lighter one that will be easier to carry back. Upon opening the basket, he discovers many riches inside. His greedy wife decides to visit the sparrow as well, and she chooses the heavy basket. When she opens it, monsters come out and chase her.

[10] "Fat Controller" is a nickname for Sir Topham Hatt, the head of the railway in The Railway Series, of which Thomas the Tank Engine is a character.

[11] Anissina warned Yuuri about the pot in part 1, but Yuuri misunderstood. "Pot" (壺), and "back" (後) in this case as in a palace's back chambers, can both be read as ko.

[12] Kishiwada - a city in Osaka.

[13] Again, referring to "The Tongue-Cut Sparrow" and the basket full of monsters.

2. Because We're Young

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2. Because We're Young

Kyou Kara Maou?! (MaruMa Gaiden #4)

Chapter 2: Because We're Young

Author: Takabayashi Tomo

Illustrator: Matsumoto Temari

Scans: [Portrait of a Demon King](#)

Chinese version: [因为正值青春岁月 @ Skyfire](#)

English translator: [pyrrhic_victoly](#)

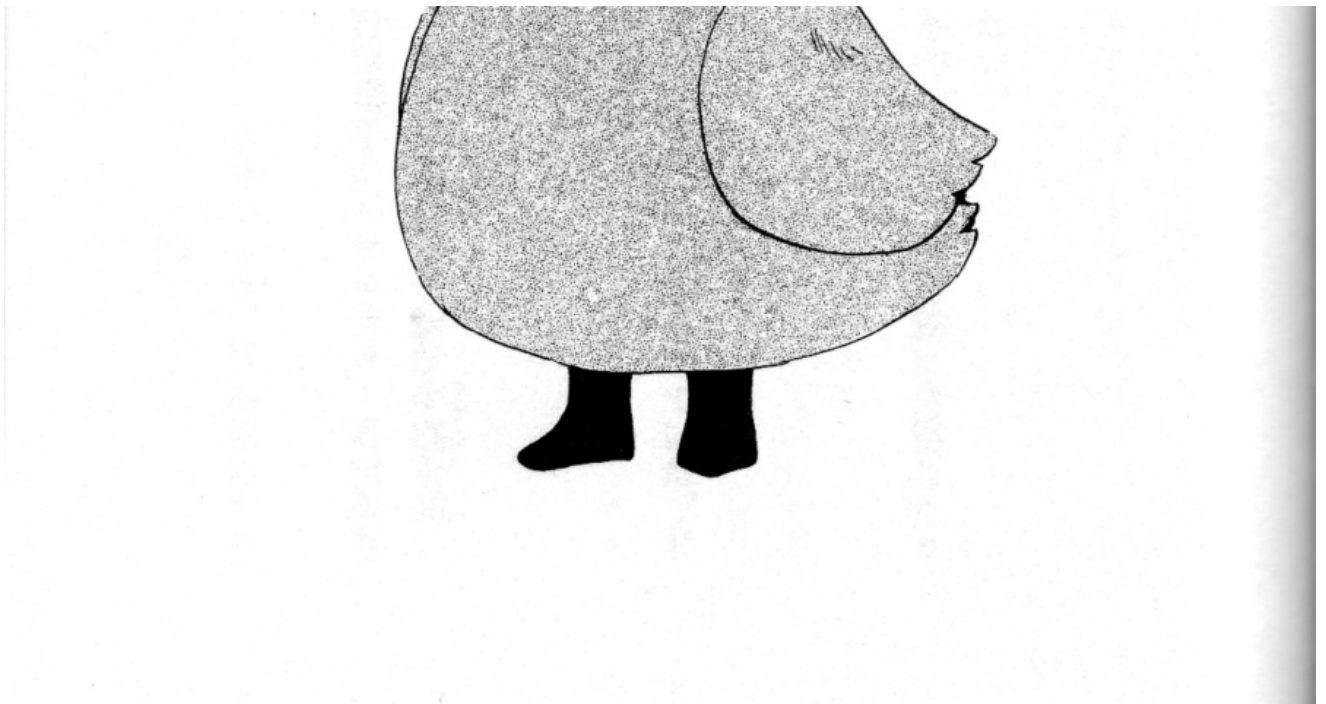
It's been
a while
since
I've had
dreams
like
those
that a
normal
teenager
would
have.

Dreams
that a
teenager
would
have.
They
definitely
wouldn't
be pure.

I'm not
talking
about
making it
to the

だつてお年頃
なんだもん





Koshien^[1] finals or winning an Olympic gold medal or getting into college. Nothing serious like that.

"Lately, I haven't had any of those dreams."

"What dreams?"

My friend Murata is snuggled under the kotatsu^[2] in my room, watching the Hakone Ekiden^[3] while peeling tangerines. He puts the white stringy bits inside the rounded empty peel.

"These dreams you're talking about, you mean 'spring dreams', sexual fantasies?"

"Spring... That, well I suppose you're right."

I stick my legs into the warm kotatsu, listening attentively to the televised relay race.

I don't feel like watching track and field competitions, and I'm just waiting to see the baseball players on the next show, anyway.

"Are spring dreams all that interesting? Even if you're up on cloud nine in the dream, surrounded by beautiful women, won't you just be even more disappointed when you wake up? I don't want those kinds of dreams!"

"I guess they're interesting enough. I'd like to be welcomed by the ladies even if it's just in a dream. But actually I haven't had the chance to dream about a harem."

"Eh? You can't even get your wishes granted in your dreams?"

"Yeah, most of my dreams involve just happening to bump into celebrities I've never met before, or ending up with girls from other classes who I've never really spoken to. I have no idea why my dreams always follow this type of pattern."

"Like that, huh..." Murata, his mouth full of oranges, clicks on the remote - the channel we were watching before had cut to commercials. "Could it be that you watch so much TV that you've absorbed it into your dreams? But why don't you pick better partners? The girls in the other class, if you dream about someone you've argued with before, won't you wake up in a bad mood? As for the celebrities, that's pretty common."

"Yeah...you're right. It's really weird, but I often dream of that bitch from class 2, the one who everyone's afraid of; the one who can even make some people cry."

Murata, his fingers sticky with orange juice, licks his fingers while smiling at me and says, "Could that be a reflection of your personal interests?"

"What do you mean by personal interests! Are you saying I like fierce women?"

"Indeed, indeed. Perhaps hidden within the depths of your unconscious mind lies your dream lover, who stands beside your pillow every night."

"Wouldn't that be a ghost? Eh— but that... It can't be... So what you mean is, that type of girl and that type of girl and that type of girl are all my type?"

"Really, Shibuya. You've already had sex with that many people in your dreams? Careful now, or they'll start coming after you to take responsibility."

"Ah, you don't have to worry about that. It always ends before the main event!"

"It ends?"

"Yeah."

Because right at the critical moment, something always interrupts, or I'll just wake up by myself, all confused. I can never get to the happy end.

If I can manage a kiss, that's great. Sometimes I'm unlucky and can only end up shaking hands.

Even though I occasionally succeed in breaking past this checkpoint, and I have the opportunity to go on to a more intense stage, the other person's face will suddenly turn into that of my mother's or my elementary school principal's.

Because of this, my suffering upon waking up is a hundred times worse than the average person's.

Then again, I can't say if other people have dreams like mine.

"Anyway, if my dreams always cut off at the key moment, that's like being intercepted by a porn goalie."

"It's a lot like hotel pay-per-view, where you have to pay to see what comes next."

"What a scam! If I don't have money, I can't have happy dreams? Is there inequality between the rich and the poor even in this?"

"Now hold up. The rich don't need to rely on that sort of unrealistic dream because they can go around picking up real girls or buying porn on DVDs. But... Shibuya, hearing you say this puts me at ease."

"How so?"

We flip back to the live broadcast of the race - commercials are over.

"Because now I know you're interested in things besides baseball. Ah, so you have fantasies about girls after all..."

"It doesn't matter if I'm interested. Spring dreams will come anyway, right?"

My friend pushes up the oval lenses of his glasses. He bluntly says, "I've almost never had those types of dreams. But that doesn't matter; the most important thing is the quality of sleep. And anyway, that was not the content of my dream yesterday."

"You haven't had those dreams... What does that mean? You're not just talking about recently? Murata, are you really a teenager? Or have your kidneys already failed?"

"Kidneys... That's crazy. It's not like I'm abusing them."

Just as I'm about to ask Murata, "What dreams do you usually have?" I'm interrupted by cheers coming from the TV. The first contestant has just passed the relay station.

I'm not really interested in track and field, so I lay on the floor with my nose buried in my dog's ear. I just ate some zoni^[4] a while ago, so I'm still full. There's also the kotatsu keeping my legs and waist nice and toasty. I break into a huge yawn, bringing more oxygen into my body, but it's already too late.

It's a quiet New Year's afternoon. I'll just close my eyes for a bit.

I cover my ears as a nearby explosion booms.

Artillery shells fly across the horizon, slamming into and destroying the side of a building.

"This... What's going on?"

This is a dream.

I fell asleep and now I'm in a dream.

Several soldiers, their uniforms covered with dust, clutch at their helmets as they charge ahead.

There are people pulling wagons or holding children; they silently advance in the same direction.

All around I see cracked roads, mountains of rubble blocking paths, and lost children standing in front of the collapsed doors of their homes, laughing.

I'm rooted to my spot in the middle of the road. I'm in the way; I'm constantly being bumped into by the people coming and going, but no one apologizes to me.

They hit me as they pass. But it's like I'm not even there. They keep to themselves and continue on their way.

After a short while, I see a group of people in the distance carrying a large crate. Six of them, with the rectangular crate hoisted on their shoulders.

"A coffin...?"

The top of the lid is decorated with what appear to be short-stemmed wildflowers picked from somewhere nearby.

The person with empty eyes who walks at the head of the funeral procession is...

"Murata! What are you doing here?"

Although I'm desperately shouting at him, he doesn't notice. He passes right by.

"Wait! Murata, who... Who is it?"

Murata, his eyes dead, looks over in my direction. His glasses look a bit strange; the frames seem old-fashioned.

"...It's me."

"Huh?"

"The person who died is me."

The shells pound the streets once more. Their sound makes me remember.

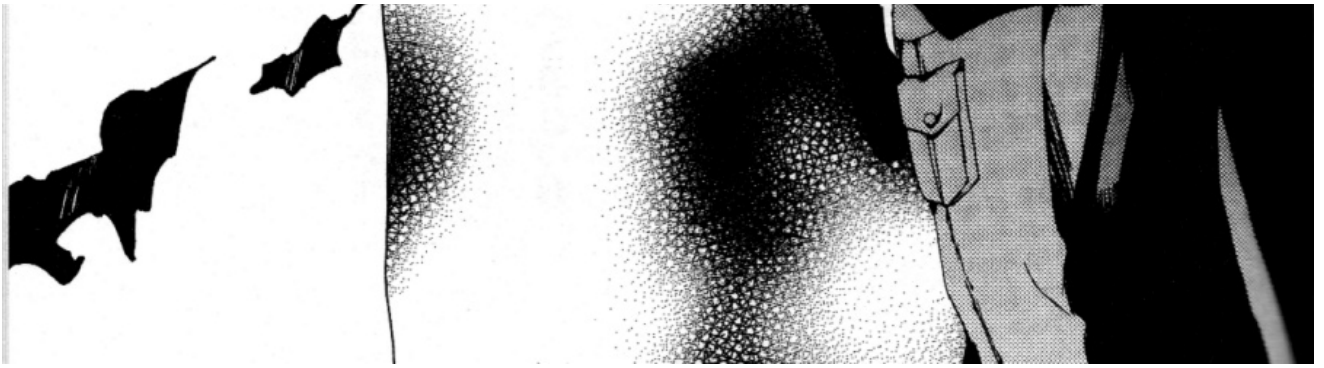
This is a dream. It's not real.

I don't know why Murata is here, but this is my nightmare. I grasp Murata's shoulders and shake him hard — I have to wake him up.

"Wake up, Murata! Let's not stick around in such a dangerous place; we have to wake up!"

No
matter
how I
shake
my
friend or
slap my
own
cheeks,
we can't
wake
up. As
we go
along
with the
funeral





procession, down the streets while the flames of war rage around us, we can't wake up.

"Shit. If we stay here, I'm going to have problems with my hearing and eyesight."

In order to break out of this dream, I smash my head into the coffin.

Ouch. That had to be enough pain to make me lose consciousness, but the scenery is still the same.

Just as I think, "Maybe both people have to break out of the dream at the same time?"—

A shell flew by in a perfect arc and landed right next to the funeral procession. I pull at Murata's hand, taking us away from the explosion. Suddenly, there was a strong force dragging me by the ear—

"You two little bastards!"

"Ah, it hurts!"

It feels like my ear is going to fall off any minute now. Murata and I scream at the same time.

I turn around to look at the TV screen and discover that the relay race is already over. Now there's a smiling anchorwoman wearing a kimono.

"Stop yelling! Even the neighbors can hear you!"

"B-brother..."

My ear still hurts really badly.

He probably feels so accomplished because he used such a cruel method to wake us up. My older brother, who's in a bathrobe, heads back to his own room. So now there's just the two of us; we both yawn almost at the same time.

"Sorry, Shibuya. Looks like I fell asleep."

"Haa— That's all right. It's just that it's easy to catch colds if you fall asleep in places you're not used to sleeping in. Your house only has central heating, no kotatsu."

"Nonono, that's not what I meant." He adjusts his glasses. "Just now, when I fell asleep, I pulled you into my dream."

"Eh..."

My friend, who had just been heading a funeral procession, smiles and says, "That was my dream."

"Murata, do you usually have those kinds of scary dreams?"

"Actually, there's nothing to be scared of. Shibuya, that dream was just a dream. But apparently, that was something that actually happened a long time ago. For me, it's something that gives me a heavy heart."

Murata rolls the oranges around on top of the kotatsu; he digs his fingers into my dog's fur.

"Anyway, is it okay if we don't get New Year's cards? Didn't you say you wanted to get them before your mom checks?"

"I had no idea something like that could happen—"

I'm in Blood Pledge Castle's huge underground laboratory, sitting backwards in a chair with my arms wrapped around the back.

In front of me is the notorious Poison Lady, Anissina, who's still up doing some late-night experimenting.

A small purple flask emits three geyser blasts of smoke.

It's cramped in here, but there are lights all around, illuminating every corner of the room. Maryoku flashlights and maryoku bedside lamps are both her inventions.

Most of my activities are carried out in the daytime, so I'm of the opinion that she could just do all her research in the morning. There's no need to wait until it's dark, especially not if it means using maryoku lights to carry out her experiments.

"What was it that you were saying? Something about entering someone's dream?"

"Yeah."

It's so late right now that even the Kotsuhizoku are sleeping underground.

Among the residents of the castle, only Anissina and the guards are awake.

I was just coming out of the bathroom when she accosted me. That's why I'm like this right now, fighting back the urge to sleep, telling her about my unbelievable experiences.

If I've been captured by Anissina, the Data Collection Devil (AKA the Red Demoness Researcher, the Mistress of Hypotheses, etc.; she has many nicknames), I have to tell her at least one incredible experience or she won't let me go. Even in the dead of night, she won't be courteous to you.

"However, a situation like that is not completely impossible."

"It's not impossible?"

"Yes. If the two people are sleeping close to each other, they have a warm relationship, and are on the same wavelength, it's not impossible to enter another person's dream."

"But finding someone who's on the same wavelength as you is really hard, isn't it? Anissina, please listen to me for a bit. It would be dangerous if I could slip into someone's dream so easily. I wouldn't want to go out there."

"True... Finding a human who matches you in all requirements... No, finding a mazoku who matches you in all requirements is a very difficult thing to accomplish. To put it simply, the probability of this occurrence is extremely small. To give a more complex explanation, it's not like saying 'The neighbor's wall has been built! Oh, how cool!' or anything as simple as that..."

"Sorry, I don't understand."

I give up.

As Lady Anissina checks the contents of a small bottle, she murmurs, "Men these days are all like this."

In her eyes, the position of Maou means absolutely nothing.

"Since the probability is so small, you're not guaranteed to find a match in any given lifetime. The vast majority of the world's people will never be able to enter others' dreams. I hear there are quite a few mazoku who even say, 'Ah — how boring, that I'll never go into other people's dreams,' or 'I'd like to see what others are dreaming just once before I die!' or 'Yamada-kun, please take away my cushions^[5] as their last words. But with my, the Poison Lady Anissina's, genius combined with maryoku, I've managed to create a great masterpiece, this..."

Anissina takes out a large, circular throw pillow and a microphone.

"Super Maryoku-powered Sleep Machine, Dream— Theatre—!"

"D-dream Theatre?"

"Yes. Just place this pillow next to the test subject, and then pretend to sleep on it while holding the microphone. Even if you don't match up at all, you can still force your way into their dreams. But if your acting is rotten and the other person finds out about you, it still won't stop working. The user must bear the consequences."

"W-what? If I just use this, I can go into anyone's dream?"

"Yes."

I'm so surprised that I'm doing a goldfish impersonation with my mouth as I point at Anissina's 'Dream Theatre'. "If it's that easy, why don't you try it out yourself?"

"Because I hate testing products by myself!" After her curt reply, she adds another sentence: "Besides, I don't have much of an interest in seeing others' dreams. If Your Majesty would like to be a lab rat, please go right ahead."

"D-did you just say 'lab rat'?"

"No, I didn't say anything at all."

After listening to the instructions one more time, I take the machine (calling it a pillow would be more appropriate) and head back to my own room.

Wolf is sleeping like the dead. All I hear is the "gugupi, gugupi" of his regular snoring.

"Wolf!"

There is no response, it's just a sleeping bishounen.^[6]

I put the dream pillow next to the guy whose sleeping face is like an angel's, and then I grab the microphone and stand on top of it.

Maybe it's because I tired myself out this morning, because after I thought, "Now I just have to pretend to sleep," I was only able to count, "One, two, three," before I actually fell asleep.

Whoa! I'm not Nobita^[7]! Whew...

"Sand..."

The scene inside Wolfram's dream is that of neverending desert.

He stands motionless, alone in the middle of the boundless desert where not even a single cactus grows from the parched earth.

When he's awake, he's obviously talkative and energetic. I didn't expect that he'd come to this sort of desolate place when he sleeps. I want to go over there and shout out his name.

"Wolf... Ahh—!"

We both screamed at the same time.

Suddenly, a monster surges up from beneath the sands.

"S-sand bear!"

Even in a dream, he meets his sworn enemy. Presumably, this is something that he's experienced before, and it must have caused him lasting psychological damage.

"Wolf!"

I struggle to pull Wolfram up from the sand bear's lair with only my right hand. But because our legs are trapped in the shifting sands, we're unable to make it out of the slope no matter how hard we push.

The yellow dust and frightened look on his face is ruining his pretty boy looks.

The two of us use all our strength to get out of the sand bear's trap. Now that he's more clear-headed, the headstrong third son breathlessly thanks me.

"Yuuri, m-my feet were stuck today. Thank you for coming to save me. Thank you very much..."

"What are you saying... You're being so polite to me all of a sudden. It feels so wrong... Ah, seems like it really is a dream, huh..."

Actually, I broke into someone else's dream.

I hold on to the spare key that the thoroughly prepared Lady Anissina had given me. With it, I secretly slip into my tutor's spotless room.

At first, I was scared of being discovered, but Günter's completely wrapped up in silk sheets and silk pajamas right now, enjoying his beauty sleep.

I used to look forward to seeing this because the most gorgeous man in the whole country asleep under the moonlight must be a beautiful sight...

"Why is he wearing a sleep mask..."

He's probably the type of person who can't sleep if there's even the tiniest bit of light.

Repeating the same steps as before, I enter Lord von Kleist's dream.

Huh?

Just as I start to wonder why it's so dark all around, I discover that it's not that the light in the surrounding area is dim, but that right before my eyes is an impressive crowd of people all wearing black clothes.

Looking ahead, all I can see are black clothes, black hair, black eyes in the crowd.

"Ah, wah!"

Those people are all "me"! Looking back and forth at them, every single one is me, except for a few small differences.

Compared with the original me, they seem a lot gentler, and also a lot more dazzling.

The gigantic group of "me" all looked toward me after hearing my voice.

Fuck—!

It's Twenty-Four Eyes^[8] of me... No, it's 101 Dalmations of me.

"S-save me...!"

In the end, I scare myself awake with my own voice. Lord Günter von Kleist... is a man who has nightmares.

Lord von Voltaire is a professionally trained soldier, so even the tiniest sound could disturb him.

That's why somebody proposed that I use "Maryoku-powered Amazing Slippers" and then gave me a pair of really fluffy luxury slippers.

The soles are thick, so it's got great silencing effects.

I quietly open the door with the spare key, but then when I step inside, I almost scream.

Is this a kid's room?

It's not so much a kid's room, but more like a young girl's room?

Because all the shelves are covered in knitted animals and cute accessories, his sword and other equipment are neatly placed in the corner.

No matter how I look at it, I still think that swords and military equipment would be better suited for the owner of this room, but if I dig any deeper into this mystery, I'll only end up embarrassing him.

I figure that just seeing the way this room is furnished is enough; there's no need to invade his dream. But I promised Anissina that I would gather data on everyone, so I'll have to repeat the familiar task.

Gwendal wrinkles his forehead in his sleep; I can't help but want to reach out and touch them.

But if I did something as bold as that and woke him up, then there will be big trouble, so I have to fight the urge.

Logically speaking, I should have been able to enter his dream with no problem, but nothing is changing in my surroundings.

Looking around, it's still wall to wall filled with stuffed animals.

Although it's night, there's still a little bit of light, kind of like the faint light entering the room on an early spring morning.

"If I'm in his dream world, it's not much different from the real world, so I'm not sure about... Whoa!"

My worries were unfounded.

It's a dream, it's a dream, this is clearly a dream.

I was so scared by the Gwendal that suddenly appeared in front of me that I had to repeat that three times.

"M-mascot costume?"

Because what he's wearing is a "MADE IN GWENDAL" mascot costume.

"What's the matter?"

"N-nothing's the matter... That frog is actually really cute."

His forehead wrinkles immediately deepen.

"This is an oriole—!"

"Eh?! Really? How can an oriole be that sort of bright green color? If you have to say that it's a bird, then wouldn't it be a mejiro^[9]? Anyway, it looks really cute, so it doesn't matter what it is!"

"That's true..."

Lord von Voltaire has become strangely contented; he happily hands over something that had been hanging from the back of a chair.

"Then you should wear this too."

"What? Th-this can't be?"

"It's an ostrich. It's very cute!"

Looking at him wearing the mascot costume, his face all smiles, I can't help but want to fulfill his dreams.

But this ostrich costume... It's, ah, very subtle.

Finally, I come to the second son Lord Weller's room. Even I know that there's not much in the way of decorations in this room, but Wolf and I also know... that this room isn't locked.

Because no one's inside.

This room is not bare, but seems deserted.

The clothes, books, candle holder, change of boots, and even toiletries remain untouched in their original places. But even so, there's the feeling that this room is empty.

There's no fire in the furnace, and no smell of burning firewood.

I'm reluctant to leave; I secretly think, "Maybe there's something worth staying here for," but this dry atmosphere crushes all those expectations.

This room, which suddenly lost its occupant, is freezing cold, as if refusing any future tenants.

"So cold..."

I pull my arms in and start rubbing my palms together.

I hunch over and prepare to leave in order to get out of the biting cold.

Right at that moment, as I blinked, I thought I saw something either red or white flying in the middle of the room.

"Cherry





blossom...?"

How could there be cherry blossoms in a place like this?

And the person to whom this room belongs isn't here anymore. There's no way I could have slipped into his dream world.

Lady Anissina von Karbelnikoff, the expert in staying up late, is having a cup of tea while waiting for me to return from collecting data.

"I'm back."

"Your Majesty, you're finally back. You've had a hard day's work."

Who taught her how to speak this kind of weird Japanese?

If Anissina starts talking like this, Greta will definitely follow her.

Please spare me.

"Your Majesty, how was 'Dream Theatre'?"

"I was seriously shocked! It was a really surprising experience!"

"I see you're even at a loss for words. Please allow me to hear of Your Majesty's experiences."

As I give an account of the three dreams, Anissina nods and listens intently. Occasionally, she even takes notes during my clumsy explanation.

"This... In the desert with the sand bear, many copies of Your Majesty, and mascot costumes, is it? How strange..."

"What's strange about it?"

Lady Anissina raises the corners of her mouth in a tiny smile. This action makes her appear extremely knowledgeable, and also makes it impossible for one to deny that she's beautiful.

"I think that their dream worlds have been eroded. Before Your Majesty arrived in this country, we seemed to have all come to the same conclusion, that we would only dream of war. Whether asleep or awake, it was all about invading territories, making alliances and secret treaties, and of course the faces of men recently killed in battle. How is it that all the dreams are now about sand bears and mascots? It's as if the whole castle is populated with weak children."

That's what she says, but she's still smiling. She takes back the 'Dream Theatre', looking truly pleased.

"...Oh my!"

She carefully plucks something up between her index and middle fingers.

"There's a flower petal I've never seen before... Is it from Your Majesty's birthplace?"

"Is that possible? Maybe it is."

I take the petal from between Anissina's fingers and close my palm around it.

It won't melt like snow—

Stay in my hand forever.

[1]Koshien is a baseball stadium where two major Japanese high school baseball tournaments, colloquially known as "Spring Koshien" and "Summer Koshien", are held. Summer Koshien is the largest amateur sporting event in the country.

[2]Low table with a blanket or futon wedged between the frame and the table top. There's usually a heat source, like a small electric heater, placed underneath or attached to the underside of the table.

[3]A relay race taking place during New Year's celebrations.

[4]Mochi soup, traditionally eaten on New Year's.

[5]Yamada Takao (山田隆夫), an actor. He was once a regular guest on the comedy program Shōten (笑点), in which comedians compete to see who can tell the best jokes. The funniest person, as judged by the host, would gain a zabuton cushion each round until s/he was sitting on a large pile of cushions. A special prize is awarded for reaching 10 cushions. Unfunny jokes are punished by having cushions taken away.

[6]Dragon Quest parody. In the fantasy RPG series Dragon Quest, checking a corpse will result in a dialogue box saying, "There is no response, it's just a corpse."

[7]One of the main characters in Doraemon. Nobi Nobita is the kid Doraemon often helps.

[8]Reference to the Japanese film, Twenty-Four Eyes (二十四の瞳 Nijū-shi no Hitomi)

[9]The mejiro, or Japanese White-eye, is a small green bird with a distinctive white eyering.

3. Lost Flower

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3. Lost Flower

Kyou Kara Maou?! (MaruMa Gaiden #4)

Chapter 3: Lost Flower

Author: Takabayashi Tomo

Illustrator: Matsumoto Temari

Scans: [Portrait of a Demon King](#)

Chinese version: [迷途之花 @ Skyfire](#)

English translator: [pyrrhic_victoly](#)

迷いしちに花は



With spring in the air, the garden is full of white flowers. They are paler than the roses and lilies^[1]; coming closer,

the honey-sweet fragrance seems to have been deeply influenced by a woman's affection. But for the man who had always placed himself on the dusty battlefield, perhaps it was disconcerting.

Walking along the winding corridor, following the broken pieces of a conversation of which the voices were familiar, Lord Weller came to a stop.

The young man in front of him turned around to say, "May I ask... Is something wrong?"

"It's nothing... I just heard a familiar voice coming from that group of women."

"Aaah~" The man leading the way gave an innocent smile that didn't look like it belonged to a soldier as he gazed toward the garden. Perhaps his green-tinged brown hair was blocking his view; he brushed his hair back from his long, narrow eyes. This man, who was even younger than himself, is actually the son of the castle's master. "Her Majesty Căcilie has also arrived. She's with my sister."

"I see. So it was my mother." As soon as he thought of his beautiful mother giving away her political power to her older brother Stuffel von Spitzweg, only wanting to keep herself in an elegant lifestyle like a butterfly bush, Lord Conrart Weller couldn't help but let out a bittersweet^[2] smile. "She's come uninvited again. Will this give Lord von Wincott any trouble?"

"How could that be?! This is an unsurpassed honor."

The sounds of women chatting and giggling came from the garden. Although Lord Weller's mother is the Demon Queen, she doesn't have a monarch's bearing at all. Even during times of war, she is still not concerned in the least about dispatching troops, setting up defenses, or other affairs of state. Soldiers are subjects of Shinou and Her Majesty the Maou, but they're not acting on the monarch's orders. Instead, they're forced to obey Stuffel, who has been named Regent.

Stuffel von Spitzweg is quite determined to keep his power. He belongs to a warmongering political party, and is very supportive of expanding the country's territory. This has caused him to quickly invade the human countries surrounding Shin Makoku and expand Shin Makoku's territorial waters. Moreover, he used military force to suppress the smaller countries, taking the opportunity to declare war.

Aside from a few members of the level-headed political party that held an opposing view, most of the aristocrats supported Stuffel. Most of the citizens also quietly accepted this foolish policy.

It's been ten years since that time, and this country has not yet been able to break free from the bogs of war.

Conrad's father was a human from the country now considered to be an enemy state.

Among the Ten Aristocratic Houses, most members stick rigidly to conservative ideals about bloodlines and lineage. Therefore, even if they acknowledge him as the Queen's son by birth, his right to speak in the political sphere still amounts to zero.

On top of that, he's unskilled in speaking to persuade others, so he's willing to forever be a rank-and-file soldier.

It's just that he heard that his older half-brother, Lord Gwendal von Voltaire, is in a very difficult position, being stuck between the two political parties.

Looking at Căcilie chasing after beautiful things and places at this time, he can't help but ask, "What Queen? So all one needs is a lofty title to put behind the luxuriously veiled throne, and that's a Queen?"

On the other hand, he can't help but give an understanding smile, thinking to himself that it's amazing that there's actually a woman like that in the world.

"I hear that we achieved an overwhelming victory in the naval battle at Ramsbottom^[3]."

"Yes, we've received that report." Conrad's train of thought was pulled back into the present by this person's words. He gave a perfunctory nod. "It should have been easy to drive them away. After all, it was only a small scale battle. Shimaron was only coming to spy on our movements."

"Even so, a victory's still a victory!" The young man, who in the future will have the opportunity to lead the soldiers of the Wincott forces, passionately clenched his fist and said, "Don't you think it's important to strike first? Do you know if Sizemore^[4] has gone out to battle? It's said that as long as it's a naval battle, no one is a match for him! If possible, I hope to be sent to his troops. I'd be willing to leave my hometown if I could study under such an amazing commander."

"For someone born in Wincott, must you go out to sea?"

This is a place where the sea breeze does not blow. Conrad could not understand at all why this young man was so resolved to join the navy.

"Actually, it doesn't matter where I go. It doesn't have to be the navy; I could be sent out to the mountains or the plains, and it would be all right. I just want to go to battle as soon as possible, for the glory of His Majesty Shinou. I also hope to distinguish myself as a soldier. There should be quite a few people in the army that are about my age, right?"

"Indeed there are." Lord Weller's tone was ambiguous as he thought of these new recruits. For the children of the nobility, that is not an environment they would enjoy. "However, those youths are all unemployed, or perhaps they did not wish to claim their family inheritance. That is why they volunteer for the service, hoping that they can achieve something there. A young noble such as yourself already possesses tactical knowledge. When the time comes, you will be given a leadership position."

"But you're not like that."

The two men stopped in the pale green corridor.

A maid stood in front of the guest quarters, embarrassed because she was told by the master of the room to guard the doorway.

The young Lord Delchias von Wincott was apparently not aware of this.

"You're the current Maou's son, and you've already gone to the battlefield many times, and you've distinguished yourself in battle many times, right?"

"I'm just a chess piece, going where I'm called. Wherever there's insufficient military strength, I go there to assist them. When the defense can no longer hold, I'll be called to go there as well. I've done nothing of merit."

"But I..."

Looking at the young man's expression as he hit a dead end, Lord Weller stopped walking and asked rhetorically, "Why are you worried?"

His position is different from that of a delinquent on the streets who's unable to make a living; it's different from a homeless orphan. He's the heir to the von Wincotts, the most illustrious family among the Ten Aristocratic Houses.

As long as he prepares well and follows the methods learned from the academy, he'll be able to mount a great military campaign.

Or is it that this passionate young man knows why Conrad has been called to this place, and so he thinks his position is being threatened?

Even if he's sent to a remote territory, the Wincott clan has been residing here since before the founding of the country. This family has left a great impact on the history of the Mazoku.

There are special abilities hidden in their bloodline, so there are quite a few born with exceptional magical ability. In the past, some of them also took the position of Maou by Shinou's decree.

As for those soldiers without magic, it is said that all of them are quick and strong. In terms of fighting ability, they have never lost to a representative from another region of the country. However, they do not have the tradition of passing down the arts of swordsmanship or marksmanship, and so are unaccustomed to armed combat.

In order to make up for this shortcoming in his troops, the head of the household, Lord Odell von Wincott, turned to Lord Conrart Weller for help.

He hoped to entrust the training of his soldiers to the young man called the "Swordmaster".

For his heir, this is not an interesting matter.

Moreover, Odell attaches great importance to outstanding military service among his family; his personality is very boldly upright. That's why Delchias hopes to win his father's recognition before Lord Weller does, and why he wants to quickly gain military experience. He wants his father's approval.

"If you're dissatisfied with your father's decision to invite me, I can refuse the position."

"No, Lord Weller, it's not what you think! I approve of my father's proposal. To be indebted to Your Highness... No, that's not right. To be indebted to Your Excellency, I approve. No situation could be better than this!"

"Then, is there something else you're unhappy with? A young member of the nobility wanting to place himself in the middle of danger... The situation on the battlefield hasn't reached a point where this would be considered normal."

The young man lowered his head and softly replied, "...To protect my family's reputation."

"Family's reputation?"

Lord Weller thought, "Is there a disreputable rumor going on about this family?" He honestly had no clue.

"My father hasn't completed his military campaign this time. Although he's still a healthy man, if he were to go out with His Majesty Shinou's troops, his age would be an important factor. My uncle suffered a foot injury three years ago; even riding a horse is difficult for him now. Luckily, my older sister's magic has everyone's recognition, but it was extremely difficult for her to obtain a respectable position in the army reserves. But if I have to send my blind sister to the battlefield, then I really... I really can't do it. In addition, my older brother died young. In this family, there's only me left."

"Your words are truly worthy of admiration."

Conrad thought it must be hard to shoulder the burdens of one's entire family. At the same time, he took out his mistaken views and compared them. He had thought that this was just another young son of the nobility asking for trouble.

"I thought that you were overly eager to join the military. Regardless of the family, there will be generations with different opportunities. Every family will encounter a time when they are unable to produce soldiers. The Wincotts have all tried their best to support the country. Therefore I believe His Majesty Shinou will not blame your family."

As for the other aristocrats, they also won't slander this family. After all, they have to spend what time they have looking after their own affairs.

But he himself is different.

In the soldiers under Conrad's command, none are from prestigious households.

Not only are they middle or low class citizens in Shin Makoku, but they even have human blood.

Fortunately, this matter has not reached the Regent Stuffle's ears, but among the soldiers, there has long been strong suspicions about the patriotism of those with human blood.

In order to assuage these doubts, they are forced to participate in the most dangerous battles on the front lines. They risk their lives and go all out in battle.

But no one expects them to perform well.

Without noticing Conrad's bitter smile, the young Wincott continued to speak.

"Even if there's no one to blame on the surface, there will definitely be people who whisper about us behind our backs! They'll say things like, 'Even if you have a glorious history, now you're just rural aristocrats at best!' Perhaps Your Highness would not understand, being related to the von Spitzwegs..."

"My father was a human of unknown origins."

The youth's facial expression changed drastically. He was embarrassed because he had made an indiscreet remark, so he lowered his head and stared at the tips of his toes while he apologized.

"I'm...terribly sorry..."

"That's all right; I don't care. On the contrary, it's rare that anyone would envy me. Most of the aristocrats aren't willing to acknowledge me as a Mazoku. In such a situation, your father was willing to turn the responsibility of training the soldiers over to me. I feel very honored; my heart is filled with infinite gratitude."

"Then you promise to take this on?"

"That's what I've planned."

The young man swiftly lifted his head, and asked excitedly, "Really?"

"Really. If you have use for a younger member of the family like me."

"Thank you so much. Your Highness Conrad... No, Your Excellency, this way father will change his mind about marrying off my sister!"

"Marry off your sister?"

He had not heard that the daughter of the von Wincott family was of marriageable age.

It was said that she was exceptionally skilled at magic, but it was a pity that she was blind. Otherwise she could have displayed her abilities on the battlefield.

But those were all rumors spread by lonely soldiers.

The soldiers who lived with Conrad were only interested in women they could meet, like a wife or lover in their hometowns, the women they saw in the streets, or the women they molested in the bars.

It was the same in the other castle, so until now he hadn't had the chance to know what kind of woman this young man's sister was. He only knew that she was the current Maou's friend, and that the two seemed to be very close.

"He's planning to marry my sister into the Grantz family." Delchias spat out the name like it was a personal enemy. "He's going to marry her to Lord Adalbert von Grantz."

"Is that so." Conrad had heard that name before. That person was very handsome, was a strong soldier, and had a long string of military successes to match his looks as well. He was the type of man that women went crazy over. "I think that will be a good marriage..."



"It's not good at all! Von Grantz looks down on us. If she gets married into that kind of family, my sister will never be happy!"

"Really?"

From a soldier's view, he was an impeccable man. But from a prospective bride's view, there may have been some problems associated with the family. However, no matter what he said, this was not an issue in which he could meddle.

The wind changed direction again, and he again heard the sound of women laughing. Lord Weller urged his guide on, the youth who had not completed his task yet. They continued walking toward the city.

Josak Gurrier gave up even as he was still holding the pass in his hand.. It was the first time he had entered the castle, and he was lost.

"Eh— Where am I? Where am I? Where the hell am I, damn it!"

All he had seen so far were never-ending stone walls. Viciously grabbing a handful of his hair, which was the color of ripe fruit, Josak started to speak aloud to himself.

"I can't believe that someone like me, who can sneak in and out of enemy camps with no problem, would get lost in Her Majesty the Maou's castle."

He had been in the military academy; he had also been a soldier. He knew the area around the city and the suburbs by heart, but he had never set foot in the famous Blood Pledge Castle. Actually, that place was off-limits to all but the Queen and her trusted subordinates, members of the Ten Aristocratic Houses, and the servants who passed in and out all day.

For an ordinary soldier of unknown origins, there was no way to approach this place except to be on guard duty.

"Where's Instructor GunGun-sama?" He reached in to loosen the collar of his uniform as he mumbled under his breath.

The document he had tucked in his chest would be useless without a signature; it would just be an ordinary sheet of paper.

If he wanted to go into the military academy instructor's office, he had to walk straight ahead, exit into a large courtyard and then follow a winding corridor to the north, turn into the gate on the right and keep following along the left hand path, turning to the southern part of the castle. Then he had to turn right, turn left, turn left, turn slanting right, and then take approximately 58 large, slow strides... After asking for directions, he finally made it into this part of the castle, but after crossing the gate, he had accidentally tripped. And now there was trouble. To his right were many doors of the same color and style.

"Anyway, what's a 'long, slow stride'? What does 'long, slow stride' even mean? Can I do it with feet this size?"

Right now, he could only look around randomly. If he could even find a kid to show him the way, that would be great. However, the person he found wasn't a cute young lord or lady, but a soldier who held himself with great dignity, and who had a murderous aura about him.

The other man turned around a corner, walking by very quickly. Judging from his clothes and the quality of the sword at his waist, this man should be a high-ranking noble. He himself had dealt with all sorts of privates and captains, but he'd never seen that sort of dark green uniform before.

The upper part of the man's uniform wasn't much different from his own in terms of length. If the waist on the long

coat was real, then he must have had very long legs. His hair, a dark gray that was nearly black, was bound up in a ponytail, but for some reason, a few strands were sticking to his cheeks.

With a sharp look in his eyes, he said, "You're not a guard. What's a soldier like you doing here?" His eyes, which looked very unhappy, were a deep blue.

"Ah!"

His melancholy expression was actually quite attractive. Presumably, many women went to extremes to impress him.

"...Who are you?" Stopping about five paces from him, the tall man asked a question— That was a deep voice that one could easily become infatuated with. "You look unfamiliar. Are you a new guard?"

"No, that's not it."

Uh oh. He forgot to show the proper respect.

After discovering this, Josak added a quick, "Your Excellency."

"I thought as much. You don't look well-suited for the guard position."

"You have great insight, Your Excellency."

Josak moved his line of sight downward and found that there was, underneath the chest area of the deep green uniform, an unnatural bump. This man's already a member of the Ten Aristocratic Houses, so did he still need to steal grain? As soon as Josak thought this, he was unable to keep back his smile.

"If you're lost, return to the main entrance and try once more. You should be able to find your way as long as you follow along the outer wall."

To be honest, Josak had really wanted to follow that suggestion and try again. However, this man hadn't offered to help him find the right path.

Coolly suppressing his emotions, the man refrained from blaming Josak for acting so rudely toward someone of a higher social status.

If a commanding officer used such a calm voice to issue orders, it would probably be impossible not to obey the order no matter what it was. Only a man with this kind of voice is suited to lead the armed forces.

Judging from his age and the aura he gives out, he's probably in a prominent position.

Although you can't judge a man by his appearance, he should be over a hundred years old. If he didn't have wrinkles on his forehead, it might have been possible to see his real age.

By human years, he should be about 26-27 years old.

After doing this comparison, Yozak suddenly felt guilty.

The years he had spent in Shin Makoku already outnumbered those he had spent in human lands. It's just that his skill in guessing a Mazoku's age has remained the same as when he first arrived. Even now, he still feels that his own aging is unbearably slow.

What part of him is human? And what part is Mazoku?

Perhaps if he could use hard data to calculate this, he'd be much happier.

"If you have some business here, state your unit and rank."

Only half the words had gotten out when the aristocratic man's chest started to expand. Actually, it wouldn't stop moving. He arched his back as if he was letting the lump under his clothes go where it wanted.

Josak couldn't help but inquire about this strange situation.

"Your Excellency, how is it that your chest is moving?"

"Ah, that's not, this is..."

It looked like he had placed a small animal under his clothes, and not only that, but its ears were about to pop out.

Was it to keep warm?

No, it was a warm spring afternoon. Would it be necessary to hold onto something furry in this weather? And if it was really to keep out the cold, he didn't have to hide it, did he? Josak had to suppress his smile and—

"Gwen—dal—!"

As soon as he heard the shout resounding from another corridor, the solemn aristocrat started to tremble. His complexion got worse and worse. His eyes darted around nervously, as if seeking out hiding places.

"Gwen—dal—!"

Just hearing that voice rendered him completely flustered. He stuffed the animal, which was perhaps a kitten, back down into his shirt, and at the same time grabbed hold of a nearby doorknob.

"Damn it!"

It was locked. No matter how he turned it, there was only the creaking sound of rusted metal.

"Excuse my insolence, Your Excellency, but please close your eyes for a sec... Hyaa!"

Josak pushed the officer behind him and kicked the lock and hinges off the door. He used his shoulder to hold open the wooden door as he said, "Ah— How mysterious. It opened without a key. If you're not opposed to it, please enter."

Without first expressing his gratitude, the man charged into the room and hid behind the large desk. Only the hem of his coat was still visible.

Josak smiled as he held up the door. The shouts and footsteps were getting closer; that person seemed to almost be at the bend in the hallway and would arrive very soon. If asked, "Where has so-and-so gone?" all he had to do was say, "Haven't seen him," right?

It wouldn't be a lie because Josak didn't know for sure if the man with the kitten hiding behind the desk was "Gwendal".

If he was lucky enough, this person might be able to tell him where to find the instructor Lord Günter von Kleist. It would be good enough if either the man who ran and hid, or the woman coming this way were familiar with the castle.

Just as Josak managed to close the door, the pursuer rounded the corner, walked over, and suddenly stopped.

This person kept rubbing the soles of her leather shoes on the stone floor, and was even giving off a burnt odor.

Her imposing manner was quite intimidating.

"Gwendal!"

The voice sounded very severe; perhaps she was an infamous woman. Josak was about to turn back around when she firmly wrapped both slender hands around his waist.

"Oh!"

He could feel the woman's chest pressed to his back. At that moment, he felt like he had hit the jackpot. Any minute now, she would say "Gotcha!" or some other sweet and happy phrase...

"You're completely captured!"

"Gah!"

The petite pursuer grabbed a hold of Josak's hands; tightening the grip of her arms, which were extended under his.

"Gah...wait, wait a minute!"

"I've finally caught you, Gwendal. I never expected that you would escape from my all-day Mazoku nightmare research. It seems like today you're even more slippery than usual."

"Guh-Gwen— Gwen—"

He couldn't get anything out because the air was being squeezed out of him.

"Just give up. What are you doing, shouting your own name at a time like this? 'Gwen, Gwen, Gwen,' you say. Are you a duck now?! Really, you're so stubborn!"

"You... You've misunderstood... Gwen— Gwen! I'm not Gwendal..."

"And you're trying to pretend to be someone else again. You should have learned your lesson by now; that won't work on me because there aren't many in this castle as absurdly tall as you."

Listen to me!

Josak thought to himself, "If I stay like this, I won't be able to breathe anymore," so he tried his best to wriggle out. Even if he couldn't move the restricting hands, at the very least he would be able to move his head.

"Are you trying to headbutt me? I'd advise you not to go through with such a futile resistance. Just a few days ago, during the testing of the 'Amazing Defense! Maryoku-Powered Helmet, Bullet Forehead-kun', we discovered that your forehead wasn't quite resilient enough... Eh?"

The petite pursuer stood at Josak's back and took a deep whiff.

"Smells different. Gwendal, have you taken it upon yourself to stop using Poison Lady brand impure soap? Oh god, even your hair color's changed. It's because you haven't been using Poison Lady brand Super Stench 'Blinding Spray' shampoo that your hair's turned into the color of rotten oranges!"

"I, I am not a rotten orange! It hurts, it hurts, could you please loosen up a bit!"

"Your voice has also changed... Could it be that the one who secretly smoked the sooty mold^[5] I was collecting wasn't a loud duck^[6], but you?"

Josak Gurrier used all of his strength to twist his body around, attempting to break free from his opponent. He also

wanted to see what kind of fearsome warrior this person actually was, to be able to squeeze him to death.

But nothing happened.

It seemed that this person was of a smaller stature than him, so he moved his line of sight lower.

He could only see some hair twirling.

He took one step back, two steps back, and then turned again, directing his gaze with great difficulty to— Really short.

If the two of them had been hugging, he wouldn't be able to rest his chin on her head. No, she wouldn't even reach his chest, and she looked younger than him, too.

However, he couldn't use this alone to judge that she was younger, because a Mazoku's age can't be accurately guessed from physical appearances.

"I'm telling you, you've got the wrong guy!"

The other person's eyes widened. She looked Josak up and down, then smacked her own forehead and said, "I never thought the Poison Lady Anissina would make such a mistake!"

"Poison Lady—?"

Josak couldn't suppress his shout.

She's the infamous Poison Lady Anissina!

One of Shin Makoku's Three Great Witches^[7], the fanatical maryoku researcher, the Red Devil Anissina...

The incredible stories of Lord Anissina von Karbelnikoff were famous even among the soldiers.

For example, taking down a rampaging bear with a single slap, hitting the pressure points of a man-eating four-horned dragon, winning a staring contest with the king of the mermen, etc. These interesting tales spread around the bars or the camps where the soldiers were stationed, and each one sounded completely impossible.

The drunkards all put their own spins on them.

Piecing things together from the nonsensical rumors, the lead role in these stories was a huge guy with a head of wild red hair; a bear in the right hand, a shark in the left, and also in possession of frighteningly sharp teeth.

In reality, only the red hair was true.

According to the drawings made by the artistically skilled soldiers, there also should have been macho horns growing above the ears.

God, to think that it would turn out to be a woman!

Thinking carefully about it, though, someone being called the fanatical maryoku researcher wouldn't normally be a very muscular person.

The real version of this person was standing in front of him right now.

This person wasn't normal.

Moreover, "Poison Lady" wasn't a nickname others called her. It seemed like something she used for herself.

"It's such an honor to meet you...though I thought you were a large-statured man...woman warrior."

He never thought that, upon meeting the real deal for the first time, she would turn out to be a woman who ran around wearing such unique clothing.

Josak accepted her challenging stare, but secretly let out a sigh.

Lady Anissina had her hands on her hips in a pose that said she thought herself to be amazing.

Her fiery red hair was bound up in a high ponytail that flowed down to her waist. She lifted her sky blue eyes just a tiny bit while lowering her stern eyebrows in an expression of curiosity.

Between the tall lord who was hugging a cat and Lady von Karbelnikoff who chased after him, there were no cuter people among the Mazoku.

For Josak, a spectator who didn't understand their routine, he'd really seen a lot in today's tour of the castle.

"Please forgive my rudeness, Lady Anissina, Your Excellency."

"I didn't think there would still be people calling me 'Your Excellency'. Please don't lump me in with the soldiers, those violent fools, all right?"

"Then how should I address you?"

"You may refer to me as Lady, -sama, Doctor, or Professor. They're all fine as long as you use them with the proper respect. But what about you? You're a stranger. Judging from the color of your hair, are you a painter?"

"About that, I'm sorry, but I'm one of those violent fools. But I'm just a regular soldier with no rank worth mentioning, in the troop that gets sent all over the place. Lady Anissina, I'm here today to look for the military academy instructor's office, but unfortunately I've gotten lost," Josak said with a shrug and a smile. A normal person would have said this while looking troubled and stuttering.

Upon receiving a request, they would head out to lend support no matter where the others were located. It was like being on a boat, but never finding a harbor. All the other soldiers made fun of them.

After hearing about this, Lady Anissina's face didn't really change. She only flicked aside the hair on her shoulder and said, "I don't recognize that troop. The official name, report!"

Josak was startled by these words. He snapped his heels together and straightened his back, adopting the posture used to address higher ranking officers. "Forgive this subordinate's disrespect. I'm a soldier of the 12th division's Merrick unit, Josak Gurrier."

"Oh, Lord Weller's unit, huh."

"You know him?"

"Lord Weller is my friend's younger brother. I've heard of his exploits, and of course about his unit's many victories. Most did not expect that your unit would become our main force."

"It hasn't gotten to that point yet..."

"Of course it has. Don't they say, 'Good and evil, Shinou sees all'? But to be honest, it would be quite suspicious if His Majesty Shinou hadn't foreseen this. He can see everything using just maryoku."

She didn't sound very religious.

"According to the analysis of Maryoku-powered Eye #1, the spying machine, Virgin Mary, your unit has long since been chosen by MONITOR. It's often at the top of the list."

"That..."

He didn't know what a MONITOR was supposed to be, but it was great that she knew Lord Weller. Josak thought of the reason why he came to the castle and lightly placed his hand over his chest.

He rarely came to the city, but he was here now to express the soldiers' discontent. It was all for the sake of having his childhood friend and commanding officer, Lord Conrart Weller, resign from his new post.

No matter what they had said to him, he wanted to accept the invitation to Wincott province and left without saying a word. Lord Weller went to become an instructor, a drill sergeant; to take on such a mediocre position.

What sort of joke was this!

If Lord Weller were to leave the army, what would happen to the soldiers under his command?

What if they were to get a new captain who was a bratty young aristocrat?

If they were to be put under the command of someone horrible, not only would he be incompetent at managing the troops, but they wouldn't obey him, either.

Even if they were all decommissioned, the soldiers wouldn't be able to make a living. These men, who've gotten used to the battlefield and to constantly fighting to survive, wouldn't be able to handle a civilian lifestyle.

In order to calm those who were worried about losing their jobs, Josak and a few other members had to write this petition. But to be honest, even though they collected numerous chickenscratch signatures from the soldiers, it lacked persuasive power.

They needed the signature of a high ranking official, and that was why Josak was here.

Everyone's first idea was to seek out the support of their military academy instructor, Lord Günter von Kleist. However, even if they only met by chance, if he could get the support of Lady Anissina von Karbelnikoff, it would be twice as strong. The more signatures they could get from the nobility, the more weight the petition would have.

"What can I do to convince her?" Josak thought. He bowed and softly said, "I'd like to discuss something about Lord Weller. Your Excellency... No, Lady Anissina, please, if we could just talk..."

The red demoness crossed her arms over her chest, raised her chin, and snorted contemptuously; she appeared to crush him with her gaze.

"Do you have maryoku?"

"Maryoku? No— I don't have any..."

"Then there's nothing for us to speak about!"

He nearly lost his footing at her abrupt refusal; it was as if all his manliness had deserted him at that moment. It was just maryoku, but maryoku was often a serious issue.

Anissina didn't try to offer the tiniest bit of reassurance before she commenced tracking down her original goal.

She asked Josak, who was perhaps the only eyewitness, of her target's whereabouts. "Josak Gurrier. Did you see which way Lord von Voltaire went? He's tall, with dark gray hair, should be wearing a dark green military uniform."

"Lord von Voltaire?" Josak parroted back the question.

Lord von Voltaire?

Then that means the person hiding in the room behind Josak, the tall aristocrat with the kitten, is His Excellency Lord Gwendal von Voltaire?

The name was very familiar.

No, not just familiar. This was a man that he wished would sign the paper he had folded and placed in his breast pocket.

Speaking of Lord Gwendal von Voltaire, he's the eldest son of the current Maou, Her Majesty Cäcilie von Spitzweg, and also the elder brother of Lord Conrart Weller, the man who was still Josak's captain not long ago.

In essence, he's the heir to the throne. On top of that, he's been at the center of the politics of von Voltaire province for a few years and shows a lot of promise. He almost always wears a cold expression and smiles infrequently. His performance on the battlefield is the same as his appearance; he is incomparably calm and callous.

On political matters, it's said that the majority of the people admire him because he dares to speak out against his uncle, the regent Stuffel von Spitzweg.

Although he's not one for flattery or kind words, he's actually quite popular with the ladies. They blush, but say without shyness, "I really want to give myself as a gift to please His grumpy Excellency." Those types of ladies.

Oh— Ah— So he's actually that kind of person.

Upon hearing the pursuer's voice, Josak remembered the Gwendal that he saw. He couldn't help but touch his chin in confusion.

The girls in the castle town who go crazy like that, as well as the ones who "can't resist his furrowed brows", there's no telling how they might react if they were to see how he was trembling behind the desk with a kitten in his arms.

"Ah, that would also turn into 'giving myself to His Excellency in order to protect him', or something."

"What are you saying?"

"No, it's nothing."

It seemed as if she hadn't heard.

Now he just had to protect that man so he could get the documents to him. But Anissina just happened to be here. If it was possible, he'd like to take this opportunity to hand Gwendal over to her. It would make her think that he was a useful man; perhaps it would leave a good impression on her.

Then again, he couldn't risk falling for her feminine wiles and ending up disappointing the companions he'd been with through life and death.

But he didn't have the heart to lie to this cute girl...

"Eh— If you're looking for a tall officer in a dark green uniform, I remember him going that way..."

"Wait!"

Before Josak could finish, the red-haired Poison Lady held up a hand to stop him. She narrowed her eyes as if checking for her own carelessness.

"No! Gwendal went that way. I didn't want to ask you in the first place. I guess I can only count on my magic and intuition. Using the probabilities I've calculated based on analysis of his past actions, I can track down the escaped Lord von Voltaire's location."

Josak was almost hit with her swinging red hair as she swiftly turned around. So dangerous, so vicious her strategy. This was the crucial moment.

"But even if I have a clear mind, I can't predict what actions he'll take in his desperation. Sometimes people will have sudden fits of inspiration, and will do strange things in a last-ditch effort."

Josak Gurrier thought, "Then maybe you shouldn't force him into a corner..." but looking at the woman, and the way she clenched her fists and spoke with such cute obsession, he didn't have the courage to interrupt.

"At times like these, I have to use this: the special maryoku-powered tracking device, Nimble Nose...ahem!"

A moment after she cleared her throat, she already had a puppy-like stuffed animal thing in her hand. Where did she get that from? Did Anissina's pocket lead to a different dimension?

Clank-a-clank-clank-clank-clank—! "Nimble—Nose—Elephant—kun—! Has only been used in tracking down some unimportant counterfeit goods! And it's nearly complete!"

"There are actually counterfeits of your own inventions... Is that little guy a dog or an elephant?"



It looked like the maryoku-powered doll was working just fine.

Even the tiniest parts were perfectly sewn on, and the colors on the head and body complemented each other brilliantly. However, it was obvious that the body and tail were that of a dog's, but the ears were huge. And furthermore, at the end of the long nose was a large chrysanthemum.

"All right. Nimble Nose Elephant-kun, help me find Gwendal!"

Anissina, letting out a fearful smile, put the tracking animal on the ground. After the yarn animal's nose let out a hissing sound, it started running toward the west.

"Oh? Oh, Nimble Nose Elephant-kun, did Gwendal go that way? Wait for me, Nimble Nose Elephant-kun... No, that's not right. You shouldn't be waiting for me!"

The little yarn animal rolled along in front of Anissina, who was arranging her skirts, preparing to run. Perhaps it had smelled Gwen — then again, one couldn't help but think that was a failure.

Josak waited until the fiery redhead had left his line of sight, then knocked on the door behind him.

"She's gone now, Your Excellency."

Only after hearing that did the man with the dark gray hair poke his head out. He cupped both his hands under the precious kitten, and then straightened up his slender body, stepping out of the room right foot first.

"Man, that's the first time I've met the Poison Lady."

"...Is that so? Well, then you'd better pray not to have anything to do with her in the future."

"Why is that? Don't you think Anissina is cute? Oh, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have referred to a member of the Ten Aristocratic Houses by her given name."

"You try calling her cute to her face. She'll kill you."

Although he was glowering with those dark blue eyes, the other man didn't seem to be angry.

No matter how intimidating he seemed, he had no violent intentions. And it was all thanks to the little kitten he held in his arms.

"Ah~, look at you, poor thing. Don't worry, it's all right now, kitty. The evil, scary person is gone."

"Didn't she say that the experiment wouldn't hurt the animal? So you didn't have to grab it and run, did you?"

He scratched behind its ear with a finger, and the frightened kitten let out a "meow~" as it opened its mouth, showing its canines. They were tiny, but already looked like well-formed teeth.

"That's not it; it's just a kitten... No, this cat is being raised outside of the military compound and is not a lab animal. Don't ask any more."

"Well? If it's like that, Your Excellency... Does that mean the intended test subject was you...?"

"I told you not to ask!"

Josak looked up at the ceiling and decided not to tease anymore. However, no matter how he tried to hide it, there were bound to be interesting rumors sooner or later.

Gwendal managed to muster up his original dignified bearing. He gently returned the small animal to his chest and

said, "I owe you a favor."

"May I ask a favor of you?"

Quite a few aristocrats embraced the idea that "it's natural for those of low social status to do everything they can to improve their station". This nobleman, however, treated a lowly soldier like Josak as his equal, even going so far as to want to repay a favor.

It was a good thing he hadn't betrayed this man. Although there's no telling how much suffering... No, Josak didn't want to know.

He had no idea that he himself would be so confused by Lady Anissina von Karbelnikoff's cuteness and nearly tricked into handing over the man, but it seemed like his decision back then was the right thing to do.

"If I ask for something right away, will you be angry?" Josak Gurrier tilted his head like a clerk at a confectionary as he took out and, with the utmost care, handed over the papers he had brought with him. "Please, Your Excellency, you have to help us!"

"What is it? Do you want a raise?"

"No way, we can look after our own little brothers!" [\[8\]](#)

Gwendal didn't pay any attention to the crude joke, choosing instead to unfold the papers.

"It's a petition..." The wrinkles on his forehead deepened. "You don't want Lord Weller to be the von Wincott instructor."

"Unless you want all of us to quit and drift about as unemployed bums on the street."

"However, that was Lord Weller's own choice; the higher authorities did not issue any commands to him. Although permission was granted for him to take a temporary leave, army personnel did not decide this on their own."

That was something he already knew.

"But Your Excellency, can't you order him to come back? This is also the wish of the majority of the members in our unit. That's why we gathered all these signatures."

"It's not that I can't, but..." Lord Gwendal von Voltaire passed the documents to Josak yet again. "But I can't approve of it, nor can I take initiative on my own."

"Why is that?"

Josak had thought he would receive an agreement. He didn't think that he would be cut off so abruptly, or that he would cause the other man to be so shaken. He was unable to suppress the question that he kept thinking, so he blurted it out.

"Is it because he's your brother?"

Eyes as blue as the bottom of a lake turned their unwavering gaze this way; it was impossible to tell what he was truly thinking.

"You want to say that because he's my younger brother, I'm unwilling to send him somewhere dangerous? Or is it because he's the current Maou's son, so I arranged for him to participate in fewer battles? It's not because of that. If it were, he himself would have objected."

Because Josak wouldn't accept it, the petition remained in the same condition it was in as when it was first handed over. The two people stood facing each other with the yellow documents between them.

"But didn't Your Excellency say it before? When we met just now, you said I wasn't suited to work as a guard. This should be very clear to you; Conrad is also the same."

Even though the other man used a very informal way to refer to his younger brother, Gwendal did not object. He just waited with an indifferent expression for Josak to finish speaking.

"He's a soldier. He's young, but he's one of the very few swordmasters we have in this country. You of all people should know that his ability isn't that of a fencing instructor. That kind of post is a waste of his talent."

"You're absolutely correct."

Gwendal's voice was even lower than usual as he spoke to his brother's friend. He used a tone that conveyed his hopes that this young soldier in front of him, who used such irrational arguments, as well as everyone else who wasn't here at this moment, would understand his reasoning.

"Conrart, he... Lord Weller obviously cannot stay hidden in a rural training camp. This, I know."

Josak had actually thought similar things to those that had just been brought up— that a person who possessed that kind of voice was best suited to being a military leader. And not only for the military, but he was also more qualified than his uncle Stuffel to be involved in political affairs.

Gwendal continued speaking in his admirable voice. "Lord Weller and those like you are not dull swords to be waved about at a whim. You all possess talents that are hard to come by. It is foolish behavior to keep excellent soldiers away from the battlefield. One could even say that this is throwing away our nation's gifts."

"Yes, but then why..."

"In every war there are so-called opportunities. No matter how sharp the blade, if you miss the opportunity to strike, there is only the option to be cut down. I do not wish to lose a good sword in vain."

So that meant he didn't want to send them to die in vain?

"If we persist in this war against Shimaron, the situation on the battlefield will worsen. If talentless military leaders keep getting promoted, then perhaps one small mistake will cause it to devolve into Total Warfare."

Those words were really exciting. He really wanted to applaud, and he also wanted to pat the man on the back and say, "Your Excellency is such an upright man!"

When Gwendal said those words, he had not cared that they could possibly be taken as criticism of the current regime.

As for the petition, it was withdrawn.

"If you were a soldier of von Voltaire province, I could transfer you as I saw fit. Although it's regrettable, my hands are tied regarding those under central command... Actually, I have yet to gain the authority to deploy soldiers on a large scale. If things continue as they are now, with Lord Weller under central command, then he will only be allowed in the reinforcements, and he will continue to be used until he collapses, so that is why I wished for him to be transferred as far away as possible."

Then Lord von Voltaire raised his right hand, holding up two long, slender fingers.

"Two years."

"Two years..."

"Yes. Wait two years for me. I will gain the authority to command the entire army. At that time, please become my swords on the battlefield. Become your country's soldiers, Shin Makoku's support, and brandish your weapons for the sake of this country."

What a tempting offer.

"Since the battles are continuing on, we will definitely need your strength. If anything happens before that time, it will cause me a lot more trouble."

Two years.

According to Lord von Voltaire, as long as they could hold out for two years, they would be considered the greatest soldiers. No longer would they be continually transferred, but they would be at the heart of the military forces.

And not only that, but if he accepted the proposal, they could even rise through the ranks in a way that would never again allow incompetent aristocrats to steal the glory of their hardworking troops.

Josak quietly swallowed. He didn't know how much he could trust this man. This was the first time he'd met this aristocrat; would he really fulfill his promises? Or was he just joking?

Gwendal did not understand why Josak hesitated, so he continued to speak. Before, he had been expressionless, but now his face and his voice were both full of confidence and trust.

"When the time comes, I plan to call him back myself, no matter how much Wincott presses for him to stay."

"So you mean to... keep your trump card in your hand?"

Up until now, has it all just been an aristocrat treating us as his trump card?

Josak was shaking. And he had almost been convinced by him. Although he didn't show it on his face, perhaps the other man could tell from the way he stroked his cheek, or get a clue from some unnatural movement of his chin.

Wait a sec, wait a sec. Josak Gurrier, you'd better not forget.

No matter how magnetic he sounds, this is the man who cuddled with a kitten, right?

It's a kitten, it's a kitten.

It's not a man-eating four-horned dragon.

It's also not an owl, the symbol of betrayal.

But this was not enough to calm Josak, who kept stroking his chin and cheeks. At last, he asked the silently waiting Gwendal, "When you put it that way, what are we supposed to do before then? We'll just have to put up with fame-seeking little kids as our leaders? Participate in battles all over the place? You want us to accept the incompetent leaders until we're no longer usable as soldiers, so that the opinion of us mixed race people will sink even lower. Is that what you mean?"

"Whether or not it's a young bastard... There will be an aristocrat taking over Lord Weller's post. You'll just have to act like you're back in the military academy. It shouldn't be impossible for you to endure."

Josak put on a depressed expression, and let out a discouraged sigh. He lowered his head and accepted the petition.

"I can't do it. I'll probably punch the new commander and get kicked out right away."

"Since you're so unwilling, why don't you apply for a transfer?"

"Me? Don't even joke about that. I have human blood. No one would take me." He tried to get the other man to take pity on him by saying this.

He didn't hesitate to admit that he wasn't small or cute, but that didn't matter.

"...All right." Gwendal considered it. Even if it was transferring a soldier, it shouldn't be a problem. "If you are willing to give up your position in the central military forces, I'll hire you for von Voltaire."

That's really great.

Deep inside, Josak shouted in victory.

The world is my oyster. Let me spend another two years working by your side, and count that as compliance to your terms of exchange.

As he held the returned petition, he used a frivolous voice to ask for a tricky request. It wasn't that he was testing Gwendal, but to see if he was serious about those words he had said.

"If it's like that, then you don't need to just transfer me. Would you take in all of the people listed here, please? It'd be more convenient this way. How about it? Your Excellency, are you willing to bear this responsibility? If you're not, Gurrier will probably cry as he puts forth this petition."

"You— Who do you think you are? And also, hold on, how many people is this?"

Because its master's voice suddenly became panicked, the kitten clutched to his bosom also became frightened and started struggling. The tips of the cat's ears popped out.

However, it wasn't trembling at all. It must have felt very safe and comfortable in its nesting place.

Gwendal gently scratched its ear, and then returned the kitten's head to its original place.

"Then we're done here."

"You feel that the price is too high?"

Lord von Voltaire did not reply. He just turned around and walked forth.

"Come with me. I'll ask Lord von Kleist to help write the letters of recommendation."

"Yes, sir—"

Josak Gurrier slowly tore up the paper.

He thought it over for a while, then took it back in his hands and began ripping it to pieces. Then, with his palm full of little scraps of paper, he threw them across this sunlit place.

From the distance came the sound of a young woman's laughter. Could it be that she saw the butterflies and flower petals dancing in the wind?

[1]"Lily" (百合) is also "Yuri" and could be a veiled reference to the similar sounding Yuuri.

[2]In Chinese, Conrad's smile was described as 五味, meaning "all 5 flavors". It's complex and has all the emotions mixed into it.

[3]拉姆兹玻塔姆- The romanization might not be correct. Ramsbottom is actually a town in England and a surname, so I figured that was better than the other combinations I tried.

[4]A reference to Tom Sizemore, an actor who is known for playing soldiers in movies such as Saving Private Ryan, Pearl Harbor, and Black Hawk Down.

[5]霉雾 - The closest I can come up for this is "sooty mold", a black, powdery fungi that grows on certain plants. As a direct translation, it would be "mold/mildew" + "fog", which could lend itself to many interpretations.

[6]Something seems to have gotten lost in translation here. "Duck" doesn't quite make sense, but that's the direct translation. Other possibilities: In Japanese, "duck" is also slang for an easy target, like a "sitting duck". In Chinese, "duck" is crude slang for a male prostitute. Take your pick :D

[7]Witches - actually a gender neutral term. I'm going with "witches" due to seeing it translated that way by others, but it's really more like "evil magic user", hence the gender confusion.

[8]A pun involving "salary raise" and "little brother". 昇 in "raise" sounds like 小 in "little brother".

4. The Name of the Star

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4. The Name of the Star

Kyou Kara Maou?! (MaruMa Gaiden #4)

Chapter 4: The Name of the Star

Author: Takabayashi Tomo

Illustrator: Matsumoto Temari

Scans: [Portrait of a Demon King](#)

Chinese version: [星星的名字 @ Skyfire](#)

English translator: [pyrrhic_victoly](#)

星の魔法



"I wish you could tell me the name of that star."

As he heard the request, he worried that he didn't know how to respond. Finally, he decided to stay silent and wait for the other to continue speaking. It turned out that Yuuri became embarrassed, and, suspecting that he had said something wrong, he started to explain.

"It's nothing. I just wanted to know; it's not because I wanted to chat up a girl while stargazing... Ah, no, I really do want to hang out with a girl, but it's not because I'm going on a date with anyone... Ah, so it's not like I'm going out of my way to impress someone. But pizza and gyoza^[1] isn't a good joke, right? So...I'm sorry..."

"For what?"

"If you were really going to make a pizza and gyoza joke, then I should apologize."

Conrad endured and came back with a smiling face, pretending to look very hurt.

"I never intended to speak of any pizza."

It was just like this. In order to tell him the names of the constellations, the two of them sat out on the balcony, their heads tilted up to look at the winter sky at night.

"That's the Little Red Room, that's the Big Tiger, that's the Winter Vegetable."

"W-why are they all such strange names..."

Yuuri's eyes followed Conrad's finger, committing the hand's movements to memory. The names of those stars, far from leaving a beautiful impression, were rather headache-inducing.

"Do you see that yellow constellation over there? That's the Thunder Mouse. Legend says that there was a small mouse who obtained the strength of the Thunder God and utterly defeated a giant cat. And then there are, there are those three lines of red light. Do you see them?"

"Where?"

Conrad grabbed Yuuri's right hand, which had been laying on the balcony, and used it to show him the stars' positions.

"It's just in front of your finger. That's the Boxing Squirrel constellation."

"Boxing Squirrel?"

"Yes. The legend goes that the monkey who ruled the forest was cruel to a squirrel, but one day, the squirrel's boxing ability awakened, and the squirrel utterly defeated its formidable opponent..."

"Wait a minute. Conrad, don't you think that too many of these legends involve something being utterly defeated?"

This question struck a chord with Conrad.

So he lowered his head and looked straight forward. He saw only Yuuri looking back with eyes wide and mouth half opened. His expression looked as if a child were asking, "Why is the sky blue?"

At that time, his own expression must have been like that, too?

"It must be at this time, sitting under this tree, and facing the north sky."

Suzanna Julia von Wincott stretched her legs out on the nearly withered, yellow winter grass, her back leaning against the trunk of the old tree. Lifting her arm up to an altitude which she could not see, she carefully surveyed the angle. It should be straight ahead and to the right, at a distance of about two fists.

"There's a horseshoe-shaped constellation over there, right? From that position, slant upward, and in the middle of a very faint cluster of light, there's one star that shines especially brightly. That star is called the Lone Fox Star."

Can you see it? Conrad quickly swallowed the words he was about to blurt out, but she was clever and could sense it. She narrowed her sky blue eyes in a smile, and lightly bumped the shoulder of the friend sitting beside her.

"Of course I can't see. But I really wanted to know the name of the star and its position, so I asked my father to describe it to me in detail. It was just at this time of day, at this same place. Don't you believe me? My mother and younger brother both know about it, too, so I definitely wouldn't have accepted it if I were excluded just because I couldn't see."

In this world, it was absolutely incredible that there would be an extremely gentle lady who could show such an unyielding side.

"Actually, it's quite troublesome at night. It's so dark out, without even a single ray of light or shadow; I really can't tell where anything is. Although I can rely on my memory of places during the day, just now I accidentally stepped on some horse excrement. But it's nothing. Soon, it will return to nature."

This woman, who doesn't even care that she stepped on horse dung...

Lord Weller couldn't help but pinch his nose, but to no avail. Completely disregarding her condition, she continued to explain the origins of the constellations. Then, with the index finger of her right hand, she would point out its position without fail.

"Then... Right, it should be at this angle. Are there three lines of red light?"

"Yes."

"That's the Boxing Squirrel constellation. Legend says that the monkey who ruled the forest was cruel to a squirrel, but one day, the squirrel's inner boxing ability awakened, and the squirrel utterly defeated its formidable opponent..."

"Wait a minute. Don't you think that, since you've started, too many of the stories have had something being utterly defeated?"



"Well? Don't you think they're very happy? Are there people who don't like such crowd-pleasing tales? I actually really enjoy stories where the weak and the poor overcome evil."

"...I had no idea you were such a passionate woman."

"Is this considered passionate? My brother is even more serious about it than I am. Uh...now, it's probably in that area?"

At last, she pointed straight up into the sky to a light that was either white or blue, the color being difficult to distinguish.

"I'm sure you know this one. I think the military academy must have explained it; that star never moves."

"Yes, that's what I was taught."

"Whether out at sea, in the wilderness, or in the desert, soldiers can seek out that star. As long as you lift your head and look toward that powerful light, you can get your bearings and find your way back."

Conrad followed her actions, tilting his head to gaze up at the far away blue-white light that had always been there, unchanged since before the founding of their country, and that had never ceased to shine.

"How is it that the stars are able to shine? If we were to encounter that star in the sky, I wonder how much courage we would gain? I really want to see - see how it shines. But that's a dream that I will never be able to realize."

As Suzanna Julia said these words, there was no sadness or envy in her eyes, but only curiosity. Though she said she would never be able to realize those desires, it was also as if she hadn't even had the slightest thought of giving up.

Conrad grabbed Suzanna Julia's hand, and slowly placed it on his own knee.

"Open your hand."

"What?"

Placing a finger in the center of her delicate palm, he tapped it in time with the twinkling of the star.

A strong pulse, a weak pulse. Repeated again, a strong pulse, a weak pulse.

Julia broke out into a smile, and said to the sky which she could not see, "So that's how powerful its light is!"

"Don't forget. Whether in the wilderness or in the desert, that star will always be in the sky."

She suddenly lowered her head, lightly grasping Conrad's finger.

"You must come back."

"That's the equivalent of the North Star on Earth."

As soon as he mentioned that the star's position never changes, Yuuri proudly said, "It never moves because it's located above the North Pole. Uh...it should be aligned with the planet's axis of rotation, right?"

"That's how it is. No matter what world, there are stars that play the same roles."

"Things would be difficult without that star. For a long time, it's been a guide for travelers and navigators. And so? What's the name of the North Star here?"

It was the first time Conrad had ever been asked this question, and it was only then that he realized he did not know the star's name. No, perhaps it wasn't just that he didn't know. Of the people in this country, no one had a proper name for it.

Everyone had admired the star and depended on it, but not once had they called it by its name.

"Come on! Don't put on an act; just tell me--! I have to tell Greta about it!"

Lord Weller had no choice but to again suppress the words that he wanted to say. If he had said, "I want to name it after you," his master would definitely have been too surprised to speak.

[1]The words "pizza" and "gyoza" sound like the names of the constellations Pisces and Auriga (gyosha).

5. Losing One's Most Important Person

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5. Losing One's Most Important Person

Kyou Kara Maou?! (MaruMa Gaiden #4)

Chapter 5: Losing One's Most Important Person

Author: Takabayashi Tomo

Illustrator: Matsumoto Temari

Scans: [Portrait of a Demon King](#)

Chinese version: [失去最重要的人](#) @ Skyfire

English translator: [pyrrhic_victory](#)

大切なひとを
失った



Even if that person believes in ghosts, the arrogant fortune tellers do not.

Take a shortcut through the forest.

Can't ride the horse into this tunnel that goes into the ground because it isn't high enough.

Especially near the exit, where there are a few stones that are close together. It's possible that we'll hit our heads.

Lord Weller gently brushed the hair of the person sitting in front.

"Were the people before me all shorter?"

"What do you mean?"

"It's not possible to charge in at full speed because we could get injured, but won't we just fall off the horse?"

"The problem is those stones blocking our path."

As they rode through the dim place and came out to the brick road leading into the city, Yuuri couldn't help but let out a big sigh, letting his shoulders relax. Conrad, sitting behind him, slowly pressed closer to him.

"What is it? Are you nervous about something?"

"Because the place just now was really dangerous."

"Dangerous? This is Your Majesty's territory. Although it does feel a little dark and gloomy, this area has actually never experienced any unrest.

"Aaah-- I wasn't referring to crime rates. When my mom passes by places like this, her expression is always really ugly. Also: 'nine times out of ten, there will be a ghost'."

"A ghost?"

"That's right. You know, those people who were unable to go to heaven. If we use that theory to explain things, they're people who still have unresolved issues in this world - people who aren't willing to be reincarnated yet."

Hearing his young master say these unexpected words, Conrad couldn't help but see in his mind the face of a woman from more than a decade ago.

She had a gentle personality, but wasn't afraid of anything.

"Actually, I don't believe in ghosts, but every time I listen to my mom talk about these things, I start to think it's possible that they're real. My mom also said... If, from the very start, you make your face look really ferocious or brimming with hatred, then there's nothing to worry about. Just don't let them see you and don't get close to them. It's said that the happily smiling women and children are the scariest, because their features can suddenly become very sinister. Do you believe them? These are all ghost stories!"

He turned his head to ask.

Conrad very cunningly turned the question around.

"What does Your Majesty think?"

"Don't call me Your Majesty! I've never seen anything ghostly at all, but my mom is way too serious about it, which makes it so that I can't help but suspect that they could exist... So when I found out about having Mazoku blood in the family, my first thought was that it was my mom! I thought, 'Wah! My mom's the devil...no, I mean, Mazoku! No

wonder she can see ghosts!"

Conrad shrugged a little. The way this person spoke was very sincere, and it let people feel comfortable around him.

"You've got Mazoku and mediums mixed up."

"I should have said that I classify them all as the supernatural."

On the eve of the Temple Fair^[1], the streets were much more lively than usual. This was also proof that the city was flourishing. Because there were children walking beside them, they thought it would be best to walk on foot.

Yuuri had prepared everything before he could be discovered, putting on the hood of his cloak and lowering his head.

It looked like he was becoming more and more conscientious now.

"It's not only the Mazoku; some humans also have a sixth sense^[2]."

Yuuri looked extremely surprised.

"Then do you have a sixth sense, too?"

"No, I don't."

If he really had that kind of ability, he would have long since run off to become a monk in order to make it up to those who died under his command.

"That's great. If there was someone next to me who could see ghosts, I'd want them to tell me if there were ghosts around me. Because if they keep looking at my back, I'll suspect that there's something attached to me, and it'll scare the crap out of me."

The two of them passed by a group of street vendors, entering into a bustling street with shops lining both sides.

Yuuri stood in front of a store specializing in foreign goods, childishly shouting loudly.

"Look, Conrad, a globe, a globe! Although it's not the Earth, as long as I have this, I can control the entire planet. It's as if the whole planet belongs to me...except that it's a model."

"Don't say that it's just a model. Please, by all means, you must receive this world as your own. However, we might not be able to bring that with us. It would be in the way while we were walking around."

In this situation, getting that would cram their arms full before they found all that they wanted to buy.

Therefore, they left a note with the shopkeeper asking him to reserve the model for them, and then continued walking down the street.

In the end, they even bought the star chart next to it as well. The young master found it hard to resist round objects.

"That was rude of you to say. It's not only because I like spheres... Conrad?"

There was an unusually large crowd of people at the bend in the road. Lord Weller stopped walking as he saw a few familiar faces.

"What is it? What kind of shop is it that you have to line up for? A ramen shop? But I don't smell anything."

He remembered that this area was rented out to wandering artists and performers from the south.

"Your Majesty. Do you believe in fortune tellers?"

"Fortune telling? Don't even talk about believing - I hate that stuff. Once, before a competition, I wanted to ask if I had a chance of entering the game as a pinch hitter, so I went to a fortune teller, and the fortune teller said, 'Tomorrow will hit!' I had no idea that on the day of the game, during warm-ups, a stray ball would bludgeon me in the back of the head. Not only was I unable to be a pinch hitter, but I was being sent to the hospital during the game."

"In a way, wasn't it very accurate?"

"If I was going to have bad luck, why didn't the fortune teller just say to be careful?"

Conrad grabbed Yuuri's hand, then gave a secret signal to a man in his line of sight.

The man immediately left his position to run toward them. On the streets, there were many people dressed similarly, but it looked like he was a soldier rather than a merchant.

Actually, his astute expression and characteristic pace could not be concealed.

"It's been a long time, Your Excellency. What brings you here? Is it an inspection?"

"No, just passing by. However, I'm seeing many familiar faces. What are you all doing here? Why is everyone lining up at the fortune teller? Could it be that you're asking if you should retire from the service?"

"Nonono, there's no way! I wasn't thinking of that at all. I'm just here for work... As for this...could it be? Your Ma--!"

"Shh--! It was really hard for me to come out shopping."

Upon hearing of the king's plight, the soldier covered his mouth at once. Conrad continued to speak.

"But this is a fortune teller with a lot of business. The intelligence reports don't have anything on this, do they?"

"This is... Because there's been a sudden increase in followers. Compared to other fortune tellers, she has a lot more religious followers. I've sent a few subordinates inside disguised as followers, and as soon as she shows any sign of betraying the king, we'll arrest her."

"You're exaggerating the problem."

"Your Excellency, you can't mean that. Have you forgotten the Oluwait [\[3\]](#) Insurrection?"

"That was over 200 years ago."

"But still--"

The man closed his mouth. He was silent for a while, but then tried to speak again.

"Still, as long as their spokesperson has power, we must be careful. Technically, the fortune teller hasn't been found guilty, but even if there's been only a little bit of evidence that there's a strange phenomenon going on, if they carelessly speak up that it's Shinou's royal decree, then it will be the same as that time. She'll become the leader of a crime that shakes the nation. We absolutely cannot treat this lightly."

Lord Weller touched his chin and looked over at the riotous, winding line of people.

"...Let's go take a look, then."

"Huh?"

"I will personally go to confirm whether she's a harmless amateur fortune teller or a threat. Young master, please wait for me here."

"I want to go with you."

However, since Yuuri couldn't reveal himself, he couldn't get his fortune told, and had to just tag along.

The two of them entered the dim, cold room and sat down.

Lord Weller thought that the interior was especially uncomfortable.

Sitting behind a table that was draped with too much fabric was a young woman. She tilted her neck, which was so thin it looked like it was about to snap. Her hair was green from plant-based dyes, a chunk of green hair hanging down in front of her chest.

"The events of the past have a great effect on your future."

It's like that for everyone! There's no one who can completely break free from the past, is there?

Conrad let out a sarcastic smile, but right before the other could discover it, he quickly recovered and steadied his manner.

At that same time, Yuuri, sitting next to him, shifted a little.

"Wait! Don't keep going yet... It's a matter of personal privacy, after all. It's better if I don't listen."

"It's not a problem, young master."

Yuuri lowered his head, using both hands to cover his ears. This way he wouldn't be able to hear anything.

The woman looked over at Yuuri's lowered head, but could only see the light brown hood of his cloak. Since the light was also very dim, it looked rather grayish.

She probably decided that he was not worth her attention, so she turned to face Conrad and continued to speak.

This was standard amateur behavior.

"You...lost someone very important to you in the past...and this has caused you to become very cowardly now... You let this grief hold you back, so that you are unable to take that important step forward..."

The woman's voice was low and sweet. It was capable of letting people enter a light state of hypnosis. Even if her words weren't anything out of the ordinary, for the people who sought her help, hearing her say them seemed especially beneficial.

But Conrad, who had his arms crossed over his chest, let his slight nodding take the place of a response. He couldn't help but start to smile.

"You must never let the past trap you. As long as you have even one worry binding you to that person, the spirit of the one you've lost will be unable to start a new life. That person also wishes for you to have a happy life. You most definitely must not keep holding on to your bonds with that person, blaming yourself..."

Keep those words and say them to Adelbert instead.

"Young master."

Conrad lightly touched Yuuri's stiff hand, then gently held the hand, slowly pulling it from its place on Yuuri's head. And, since they were in a place where no one would hear, he softly called out his name next to his ear.



"Yuuri, it's over."

"What was it like? Was it accurate? Oh, that's right, it's okay if you don't want to tell me about it."

Quickly walking out of the dark passageway, Yuuri grabbed his companion's arm.

Conrad gave him a reassuring smile and pulled up his young master's hood.

"She's just a harmless amateur fortune teller. She said to me, 'You've lost someone very important to you, and you are being held back by that incident, unable to move forward.'"

"That..."

Yuuri swallowed the impulse to say, "Isn't that accurate?", and looked up with his pitch-black eyes.

"It's superficial terminology that you can hear fortune tellers use anywhere. No matter who it is, everyone has lost one or two important people. If it's someone young, who hasn't seen many people pass away, it can be covered up by saying it was a famous person they looked up to, or a beloved family pet. Even property or possessions can be brought into this analogy. As soon as those with blind faith hear, 'You've lost someone very important to you,' in their mind they'll search for that person, and then unconsciously try their best to find it."

He gently shook his head:

"That one phrase can apply to anyone, indiscriminately."

When they returned under the afternoon sun, they let out small sighs.

Dark environments make people feel nervous.

That's the only reason this shop is so successful.

"Even if we need to keep up the surveillance, it doesn't have to be too intense. That group will definitely destroy itself as it grows."

Conrad, returning completely unaffected, said these words to the man who used to be one of his subordinates, then turned to Yuuri with a heartfelt smile.

"All right. Young master, where would you like to go? The jeweler is our last destination, right?"

"We're here to look for pomade, Conrad! We're looking for something to replace that stuff!"

Whenever he passes through the streets with their cacophony of sounds and streams of people, he'll definitely remember.

Lifting his head toward the gradually darkening orange sky, Lord Weller sighed deeply.

He really had lost his most important person.

He didn't need a fortune teller to tell him that.

[1]During traditional festivals, vendors would gather around temples to do business with pilgrims who came to pay tribute to the gods. These festivals are known as "Temple Fairs" or "Ennichi".

[2]In the Chinese version, it has "sixth sense" as 阴阳眼 (lit. yin-yang eye), which is the ability to see ghosts.

[3]Romanization error? I have no idea what this is supposed to say, but it's a name of some sort. It was written as 欧鲁维提 in Chinese, but I don't know what it was in the original Japanese.